

The Black Night

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The Black Night

by [Vagabond_Anon](#)

Summary

In a world approaching darkness, death, and despair a princess sets forth with her knights to stop it. She gets more than she bargained for after finally finding a key component to her plans.

Notes

“speech, *tone shift*.”

Thoughts, emphasis.

“***Old tongue, different language to the characters entirely.***”

Hunt prolog

Chapter Summary

Hunting nature's fiercest hunter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Laying down in the roots of a frozen bramble patch one young woman was mentally counting down from eighty-six-thousand three-hundred and forty, to zero. Every twenty four hours she listened for a thumping, tree snapping, and crunching of snow that signaled she could proceed. Letting her thick fur outfit take the brunt of cold thorn's bite she stirred stiff bear skin wrapped limbs and scrambled forward.

For the fourth day in a row at precisely one in the morning she crawled precisely two meters in exactly sixty seconds before flattening against the bare earth to begin her count again. Teeth gritted in an effort to stop her stomach from rumbling as sensitive ears picked out a roar in the distance which signaled the beast she was hunting had successfully caught either a deer or villager to eat. She hoped it was the latter, the deer were useful.

Last month she had spotted the lumbering giant fly down from the mountain range she herself had crossed on foot at the tender age of six or seven. She was losing track. Held aloft by dark leathery wings it must have been one of the last of its kind. Man had hunted dragons since recorded history began, driving them further and further north until they raided towns and cities for livestock no more. At some point in her life she felt bad for them. Graceful creatures that commanded both flight and fire with ease which she secretly hoped would survive in one of the few bedtime stories her late father had told her. But that might as well have been in a past life with all that happened since then. Now, now she had only one thought in mind for the big reptile. Specifically its body parts.

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After a week of methodically crawling through thorns she could finally begin preparations. This night when it stalked forth

from its new lair under the roots of an absolutely massive tree she would have enough time to work. Muttering the last line of a spell started before she moved out of the treeline, words held for a week in which she could not eat drink or sleep to ensure the channeling energy didn't backfire *horrifically*, when completed shifted the world around her into gray tones accompanied with an almost complete loss of sensation in her body.

Passing through the brambles as if they no longer existed she rose up onto her numb legs to walk forward carefully. Body passing clean through the remaining plant life she broke into a floating sprint. Uncaring for the rocks, ground, nor knee deep snow left undisturbed in her dark swirling wake. Reaching the natural cave dug out under a great tree by *Its* claws exactly twenty meter's from where she started the run she stopped to bite her lip until it bled, wiping the dribble of black liquid safely on her thumb to use as a power source before weaving together another string of words and motions that filled her senses with bright light and the sound of shattering glass. Wasn't really needed, she could draw the necessary amount of catalyst from inside her body's veins, but it was an extra layer of *can't fuck this up*.

"With this offering of my life release me shadows. I walk the path of the living onward more."

The world shifted back into its normal color, making her drop heavily to her knees. Shaking with the aftereffects of stepping through existence. Gasping for air she had to force bile back down while her body re-settled into the material plane it had briefly left. She'd been doing this for only a couple years and thankfully could bounce back without passing out now, but running through the space outside the world's eye still took more out of her than she would like. There would be more time to get accustomed to it later. Struggling back up to her ankle-wrapped feet she shuffled forward and cast aside the shredded furs sacrificed to the brambles. Down to just a chest binding and black fabric skirt she ignored the snow and slight kiss of the cold on her bare skin like every winter and started carving lines in the dirt floor.

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By the time the dark dragon returned she was ready. In its dripping maw was the last remains of its daily meal like predicted. Perched up in the highest nook she could find in the hollow she began another nervous wait until the sun rose. Only when she was completely sure that the carriage sized beast's breathing had slowed, thing asleep, did she drop to the ground.

Traditional dragon hunting involved mobilizing great numbers of soldiers, knights, and mages to relentlessly launch arrows and

spells against them until they could be brought in range of heavy ballista or died in a war of attrition.

She didn't have an army with siege equipment. Nor any friends or human relations whatsoever. So when she spotted the black nocturnal predator and decided they could not coexist in her forest she needed to crack open one of her prized ancient books and give herself a refresher on some lesser used incantations. Including one in particular that would preserve this thing's skin. Probably. Maybe. *Theoretically.*

Tiptoeing around to insure every shallow channel in the dirt floor was filled with the dripping blood from where the thing rested its head every day she smiled.

While still incredibly nervous she was satisfied that the whole place wouldn't immediately explode in a misfire. Moving to the thing's side she started uttering the final spell in her hunt.

"Flow forth from the fount of life. Power of the beyond coil and roll into my purpose. Destroy. Burn..." And for the love of fuck please don't destroy the whole valley.

Words were whispered while she raised both palms toward what would be over the central point of the blood filled symbols on the floor, and Its heart. Channels came to life with a deep crimson glow that bathed the whole hollow in red light. Walls of red translucent material matching runes forming around her hands grew upward from the floor lines to lock the animal before her in place as it awoke. Writhing with pain the only thing it could move was its jaws. Parting them it blasted out one final deafening roar of defiance toward the morning sky as loud as it could until its muscles went limp forever more. Every major blood vessel ruptured by boiling from the inside. Incantation complete the walls of light shattered and dispersed letting its body collapse.

Letting her own arms drop she was almost giddy with sleep deprivation and the success of single-handedly slaying a monster capable of destroying a small kingdom without killing herself in the process. But she wiped the drops of sweat off her brow and focused, she had no time to rest in victory. Pushing aside the hunger and tiredness from a week of work yet again she pulled out a small red half scissor kept snugly between her breasts. With a flick of her wrist it folded out into its normal size. Tool in hand she got to work harvesting one fresh corpse before the cold could damage her prize.

One dragon's worth of black hide, blood, and bones.

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In a nearby town resident's had gotten used to the frightful new routine. Every night the better-off would bundle up to hunker down in their cold basements and cellars. The poor and peasant farm hands were let inside the local church, a stone building that would likely withstand an attack by *the Beast*. And every morning they would all work to assess the damage of the night before, promise to organize some kind of response to put an end to the terror.

Two months into this routine the people of this settlement woke up like many days before. Bundled up to stave off death from the heavy winter chill many of them were ready to go out and check the barns to see if any had been broken into again or burned down. Opening their doors in the early light they trudged forth into fresh knee-deep snow, and all collectively froze in terror when a bone-chilling shriek of death rolled like a wave in the valley around them. Rushing back into their homes no one dared step foot outside for hours.

After days of complete silence from the old woods occupying several hundred acre's between the town and the mountains to the north some brave farmers had the courage to approach them. Border between logging land and the *witch's claim* made six years prior marked by dense foliage and old growth trees. It was there that they learned what happened to the dragon, the demon of the woods had slain it and strung up its skull on a tree beside the lone road that led north.

Returning with the local priest and some hunters that normally trekked south they all wanted to know for sure what happened. It was unprecedented but there was unfortunately only one way to do that. Crossing invisible border the group of over twenty stayed together as they moved up the path until they rounded a bend, blocked by a figure in long black cloak standing in the middle waiting for them. The priest moved to the front as their designated speaker. While unable to see more than a deceptively delicate chin under the oversize garment's hood he was completely on guard as if facing a wall of angry bandits. He knew her true *capabilities* after the brief conflict which solidified the town's loss of prized woodlands. He hoped she knew how to speak.

"Witch."

"*Jackass, why are you here?*"

His eyes narrowed in confusion at the gibberish full of hissing. As a priest he had studied for years under an enclave of monks that kept old versions of hand written texts safe. The oldest were sparsely populated with phrases in it, a dead language that was even rare when they were put together. There were very few people that could read some words, guides to proper pronunciation didn't exist. No one knew enough of it to hold spoken conversations

especially after the church decreed its ban centuries ago. This young wild teenager knew things she shouldn't. Physically couldn't.

"Not a man alive can speak those damnable words, witch. Refrain from using the knowledge of demons and you might be shown mercy by our divine Lord on high. Do you even know Common? Or are you nothing more than a feral tramp in dire need of exorcism?"

She brought a hand up out of her cloak to rub her temples. Shock and surprise from several of the party at the lack of adequate clothing on her ignored while she rifled through her head for the other set of words that she had not used in years of isolation. Continuing in roughly pieced together sentences that eventually came together into speech.

"I... spoke... the... firs... group of... hintsman- *Huntsmee*... **No that was close what was it... ah** Huntsmen you persons... *people* sent to kill... me... This woods mine, stay out. I don't bother you in town, you don't bother my land. If they didn't understand, fine. I said this now. *I won't again.*"

She was frowning which only put the group further on edge. But it was not actually directed at them. On quick reflection her verbal expression had been disgustingly *appalling*. A far cry from her well read past. It seems spellcasting had done little to preserve her linguistic ability. Her father would have been ashamed after all the books he had let her read, the many newer books she failed to save from the chaos after his death.

Her mistake.

I've fallen so far?

"I remember the result of our holy crusade. Some good men are still crippled by your wicked hand beyond my healing abilities. However, we do not come baring torches and His light to put your evil flesh to the fire today. We have come to ask but a simple question, one I hope your wretched mind can grasp."

Wonderful. Still an asshole. "I'm smarter, faster, than you bastards. Spit it out."

"The dragon. A beast enters the lair of a demon, weeks later a cry of death rattles men down to their bones for miles in all directions, today we find a skull at the *border*. Is the beast dead, or are you plotting some twisted... plot?"

"You suggesting I had something to do with flying lizard?"

"The beast and the devil go hand in hand. War between them wouldn't happen."

"I'm not a devil, and I ain't plotting *shit*. It's dead. Did myself. It was killing my deer. You go back to your stupid little lives, with stupid little fake *gods*, in your stupid little town."

His bony face almost snarled at the manner with which she was addressing the divines. But she had made the effort to hold the standoff and talk instead of attacking them. Few people sent on that hunt had come back alive, and even those who did had various missing limbs or deep scars. All told a tale of an impervious warrior that struck from the shadows unseen. Magic and red blade that rent flesh and armor asunder with frightful ease. Today would not be her reckoning, hopefully not their own either.

"And would you have proof of this? A skull could be unearthed from long ago to deceive us."

"**Proof?** *You want proof?*"

Before them the short girl's voice full of violent threat pulled her outer garment back together.

"I know why dragon leather is prized now, comfortable. Took effort to structure by spell. Looks pretty good even without dye. Would be a shame to stain with blood. Oh wait, *it can't anymore!* Not after I done with the *finishing touches*."

"Explain yourself! What vile sorcery are you weaving!?"

She didn't respond. Instead drew the material tight against her thin waist from the inside. Noticing black water forming on the material's surface he almost took a step forward to inspect it more closely. Until it rolled off and into the undisturbed snow around her, pure white powder quickly becoming tainted with deep crimson tones. Three of the men decided that was the all they needed to see and ran back down the road. The rest following shortly after leaving the pale faced priest alone to look up and receive a cold stare from *inhuman* blue eyes.

"Next time you try to kill me, there *won't* be survivors."

"Y-You unholy-... You're a *B-Blood witch!*? This is beyond contempt for the great Lord of light's Divine creation, this is bastardizing of even the most cruel part of nature's bounty into *heretical vestments* that can only be from hell itself! May He above all show the deep pit of darkness within you no mercy!"

He too turned and ran in terror, screaming out various prayers of protection as he disappeared back around the bend.

In the following couple years only one more local *crusade* was attempted. Disastrously ending when twenty adventurous individuals who had come from a ways off to claim the bounty on a witch were

cut down by a female knight now armored in revealing protection.

With no other recourse the local priest and influential families wrote out a request for an inquisitor to rid them of their witch, carried by a traveling shepherd south toward Imperial territory. While this letter would be delivered to a clerk of the holy court located in the capital it would be lost in the thousands of other requests that would never be read. It and many other minor letters were swept up in a takeover by the sitting Empress. Lost until a young scholar meticulously rifling through official papers that were supposed to be sealed under Imperial order came across it.

It was exactly the kind of information he had been looking for.

More specifically what his Lady had been looking for.

Chapter End Notes

Just a bit of a teaser. Been plunking away on this story occasionally alongside a couple others. Having a hard time picking the next one to put effort into.

Bad blood

Chapter Summary

“You called Milady?”

“The Imperial machine at her fingertips is being pushed harder for results than usual. Content to rest on her laurels no more after her forty-fifth has passed. We are running out of time before we are forced into drastic action.”

“I see. That complicates things doesn't it.”

“Very much so. We need an expert and soon.”

“I still say it's a fool's errand, but I will report if anything comes up.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She was a young general, a prodigy of the blade, and the heir to the throne. Her small personal army grown from her own personal imperial guard barely a few hundred strong had helped maintain the territory of *The Gold Empire* better than any of the old legions still standing dating back to its founding hundreds of years prior. Unit banner decorated from multiple conflicts over its short existence. Its leader in gleaming silver decorative plate armor inlaid with gold flourishes was not directing a field action today though. Today Satsuki marched along marble floors toward a more grueling assignment. One ostentatiously large seat of power.

It was a cavernous throne room made of polished marble to reflect the light filtered through intricate stained glass windows depicting the pantheon of divines turning it into rainbows of color that filled the space in hundreds of hues. What once was the holy of holies for the Church of Aura was now the heart of Imperial control. Finally reaching the room's far end she knelt before a pale woman in a draping white dress casually resting upon an ornate chair built on the end of a massive gold and quartz sculpture taking up the wall behind her. Two great quartz pillars on either side in back corners glowing white with collected sunlight while *The Empress* conversed with her private servant. Marks of previous displeasure still blotching the dark skinned girl's face with the remnants of blows from earlier in the week earned by one failure or another. Woman responsible for them drumming her fingers in anticipation of the monthly report from

the royal court mages.

"And what did the old men say this time?"

"Lady Ragyo they regret to inform you that they have been unable to get results even with less stringent precautions yet again. Humans have never been able to cast without stones this is a historical fact. They have been trying for years to figure out why or at least replicate the small spells your hands produced with no luck. The last few weeks have been no different. They once again claim what happened during your pregnancy must have been the life force being drawn from a child dying--"

"Useless fools! The lot of them. I know what's possible, I felt the true power of the world coursing around beyond our grasp. Just outside that which fingers could touch... *Senses opened like a child's eyes for the first time.* There is power in this world and it will be *mine*. I will *not* be presented with *failure* or told it can't be done, go, tell them that I'm finished with their *useless* mucking about and we are moving forward with or without them! Send messengers to the collage in Ventia, their best surgeons are to be brought to the capital once the roads are clear of winter's annoying mess."

"Milady I would never second guess your decisions, but they might have a point. No one is quite sure what will happen if you directly implant a stone in your body, if you will even survive the procedure or channeled magic--"

"I said go Hoomaru!"

Sighing she let the servant apologize profusely and leave before collapsing into her chair. Frustration clear on her face as she looked down her nose at the waiting presence.

"Satsuki?"

"Mother."

"Rise."

Ragyo Kiryuin only got up to study her daughter when she properly stood at attention. Flicking back silver hair bleached of it's natural dark color years ago in a fit of euphoric hunger for power she went down to trace the various raised lines on Satsuki's upper armor with a finger, circling the twenty year old young woman like a shark. Lingering with frustrated hunger on the breast plate before taking another half lap around. Talking to the back of Satsuki's head as she picked up some of the girl's own immaculately clean black lengths in her fist to smell. Not so gently tugging her head back a little with a snarl, unable to directly touch the young woman otherwise.

"You come to my throne unannounced and armed to the teeth ready for battle. *Why?*"

"To inform you that I will be leaving for Honnouji early. Word from merchants is that the roads to the north have survived the winter far better than expected and I wish to return to my troops."

Grip released on her hair she returned to standing up straight without a word. She was used to it by now. Walking around Ragyo dropped back into her throne with an understanding hum. Throwing one leg slowly over the other she leaned back to stretch. Frowning at Satsuki's unchanging stone expression spied out the corner of her eye. Voice dropping into a bored monotone.

"You should be out courting suitors among the court, not fooling around with metal toys and violent idiots out in the fringes of civilization."

"I can not rest idle while the Empire faces instability, mother."

"Always on with *duty and honor*... Daughter of mine if you keep this up much longer you will be too old and I will choose *for you*."

"I assure you that will not be necessary. I promise you I won't sit single for years more."

"...*Fine*, go play with your pitiful little *soldiers* and their crude pointy sticks. But I expect you back by the end of the year. You heard the news... I will need you to usher in the *new year* my dear *Satsuki*. In style."

"Of course, *mother*."

Ragyo's visible interest gone Satsuki turned around and left the throne room. Boot steps heavy from more than metal echoing down hallways as she went past hundreds of various servants and guards who worked within the Imperial palace without so much as glancing at them.

By new year... Can't be done I would need to leave before the heaviest snow starts falling which means I will be back for... The old winter Solstice. This year is it then? We're not even remotely ready yet. She seeks the impossible and intends to press on regardless of what it will mean for the people. Pushing me to stay for the madness. Does she suspect me of not willing to kill myself for her own damnable gain? I've been far too careful... giving her anything she wants... But what if she has? Move faster.

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In a quiet spot above a sizable fortification far removed from the intrigue and bustle of the capital she could comfortably sit staring out toward the world from a window in her bedroom. It was a simple space but she considered it more of a home than her *real* home. Slowly sipping hot tea she studied the uniform gray tile rooftops of the circular military settlement around and a soldiers drill yard immediately below the spire she was in. Behind her chair sat a young man on the floor hurriedly flipping through multiple books filled with his own notes at the same time. Unperturbed by the rustle of paper or morning wind full of water's essence she followed the spirited motions of a green haired man with a blunt sword as he clashed with a massive tower shield wielding blonde almost twice his height in a circle of cheering troops that were supposed to be training. Patiently waiting for her blue haired bespectacled compatriot to continue with what he had described in one rushed word after she opened the door with some surprise at his presence, *Huge*.

"As requested I've been pouring over any new materials that were moved to the sorting room of the Royal library. The majority of the latest batch I got my hands on originated in the desks of clerks for the former high ecclesiarchy as I anticipated."

"I don't suppose you've made the effort to come here so quickly just to tell me about the office rumors of wrongfully executed men. Were you followed on the road?"

"I would never waste your time with a useless report. I was also careful to mask my exit as usual though some of my assistants claim the fort is being watched. Assuming it's the usual curious eyes of the local bandit inclined types wanting to break in and see what there is to loot but that is easy enough for the garrison to deal with if and when it becomes a problem. Now, while a majority were indeed mundane miscellaneous paperwork and personal notes there was also a small stack of unprocessed *aid requests* stuck in among them by mistake."

"Go on."

"The majority of *those* were requests for funds to expand monasteries, repair churches, cover bribes..."

"The usual goings on of theocratic bureaucracy."

"And there were many such requests. *However... Here it is*. Intermixed in the bunch was one singular request for an *inquisitor*."

Putting delicate cup down on the small table beside her she twisted around in her seat to give him a hard stare.

"They *voluntarily* requested an *inquisition* of all things? Those zealous brutes would have butchered no less then a third of the town outright along with the accused and burned the rest of the place to ash now that they are effectively just an army of barely restrained assassins for the throne. What did these people consider so absolutely *dire* it left them *that* desperate?"

"A witch."

"They took such offense with some old hermit or druid type taking residence near them?"

"*Oh no*, she's someone much younger. More capable than a typical nature admirer or mystic. At least according to the account given by survivors of multiple hunts for her head."

"*Survivors*? Then this individual is both militant and capable enough to have inflicted casualties?"

"*Thirty-nine* total *presumed* dead by the time of writing. The first prolonged engagement of two started when some hunters found a slaughtered logger camp. They claim to have attempted contact with some girl half seen in the darkness considered responsible but she just attacked them with their own *shadows* at range. After being unable to even find let alone hit her after a number of weeks they gave up trying to fight and retreated past a length of road she never followed them across. Some time passed before a second engagement with professional muscle hired. Three were trampled to death by a dark warhorse with glowing red eyes she rode into battle on, a handful of archers reportedly fired dozens of arrows that bounced off a set of *rather odd* black and red glass armor plating and significantly exposed skin before being beheaded by *explosions* from their own necks. Most everyone left cut down in a blur with slashing wounds inflicted by an unusual red sword and *the shadows themselves* again. Only a handful of survivors combined from both occasions to give testimony to what happened. One particularly being the priest who wrote the letter which he personally confirmed getting to see her from close range at a kind of meeting held between the attempts. Described her as a deceptively womanly teenager with *gear irises* in her blue eyes. Called her a *heretic of the highest order*, which could be taken in a number of ways but he specifically noted that she spoke *the devil's tongue* in that one occasion he spoke with her--"

"Are you *sure*!? Absolutely positive that this is genuine?"

"That's what was written ma'am, not too shabbily if I might add. Very nice handwriting. If it's accurate I can almost guarantee that to use *that* kind of magic she's Elven to some degree and

knows it. Might just have been embellishment to cover up incompetence at dealing with some caster belonging to a bandit group. Though with this level of detail there *is* a fair chance *it isn't* hyperbole. I still don't personally believe it's possible to find someone fluent let alone an actual *Elven mage* of all things anymore, *but* I thought you would be interested regardless of my opinions on this particular aspect of the whole enterprise."

"*Significantly*. When was this message received? Can we learn more about her?"

"Of *that* I'm not entirely sure, there were no dates within the text. What I do know is that it never got processed which means it must have been freshly delivered right as the High Order was... *replaced* to put it politely three years back. So no one up the chain knows about it because I stole it and this is the only such report of *anyone* speaking or using the language at all. I can try digging for more particularly about her eye's origin but I thought to notify you of this before devoting the effort."

"We finally have a lead and no time to lose. Find everything you can carry about the town, region, *anything* and start packing to travel. Notify everyone else to gather I need to brush up on some things."

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While ultimately swearing loyalty to the *Empire* Satsuki was given enough autonomy to run her small city-state of sorts a few weeks travel north of the capital completely on her own. The island she had chosen originally only held a small forest and rocky shores, but today it was a formidable enclave of stone and glass. From the various docks around its circular stone base the fortified citadel stretched upward to a white spire that was the highest point visible on the horizon for miles around. Many had called it an extravagant show of Kiryuin power, some called it an economic stimulus which injected a great bit of new life into the formerly unimportant towns that sat along the great northern river's banks

In reality she had a reason for this place to exist. While important it secondarily was a physical base to build an army out of. With those troops she had re-established Imperial control all along its border, save the political quagmire of individual towns and territories that started on the other side of the Northern river and spanning all the way to the north of the continent all currently far beyond Imperial influence. But primarily this fortress was meant to defend and conceal the ancient ruin beneath its foundations. A vast underground complex not formed by human

hands and filled with ancient bones. Unfortunately that meant for the current stage of her plans she would have to leave the troops behind to ensure it's security.

Sitting upon a simple throne at the end of a chamber near the tower's top her personal knights gathered as requested. Individuals hand chosen for their loyalty and capability in anything and everything she needed them to do. One by one taking their seats at a large glass table with a map of the continent embedded within its surface before her. A green haired man with a sword on his uniformed hip sat first. Sanageyama, *the Monkey*, had sharp ears and sharper eyes. To his left was Inumuta, *the Dog*, in simple robes carrying a sack of books he deposited next to his chair. Still *sniffing out* any wisdom he could from its contents one by one. In his hands he also carried a wooden staff he lay against the table edge that had a blue circular apparatus mounted on it's top that held a clear channeling stone, a delicate device necessary for a mage's work. Across from him sat *the Toad* a blonde haired giant man still wearing the base leather and cloth layers from his suit of armor. Always ready to defend the heir to the throne or her property. Taking the last chair immediately on her right was her longtime friend Nonon, *the Snake*. Pink haired woman was the shortest in their group but no less capable than anyone else. Her usual black beret sitting on her head with the symbol of her house and bow she had been using to practice shooting rested on the table.

"Everyone, I'm going to be brief, we have roughly eight months. After that I *must* go to the capital and help initiate the winter solstice ceremony as Ragyo likely plans. I'm sure you all know what that means."

From down the table Houka snapped his book shut and got up to pace around the far end of the room mumbling to himself. Three other members to the meeting giving each other nervous looks. Uzu voicing their collective concerns.

"Ma'am, didn't we have a few more years? You've managed to hold her off so far."

"She's grown tired of my excuses and frustrated at the failures of the court mages in coming up with an alternative method to grant her the power she seeks. This will be the last couple of seasons I will be allowed freedom of movement. She wants my blood and I'm afraid *she knows* that I *probably know* by now. We're out of time and options, we need to find someone who can make sense of what she's doing and what could happen. Houka?"

"*Recalculating estimates...* So we have one possible lead and thus far no alternatives closer to home to explore. Correct?"

"Affirmative."

"Wonderful. That in mind I've looked into any materials on the topography, history, myths, and legends regarding the north that I could gather without any of the librarians noticing in the palace before making my way back. Focus specifically on works made as recent as possible."

"Initial findings?"

"A report scribbled on a sheet of scrap paper detailing the request I brought to your attention handed over by a traveling sheep herder upset about a young *Witch of Ironwood* exactly three years ago as estimated. Nothing happened after *Sun Empress Ragyo* seized control of the church and started consolidating positions under the throne. Otherwise I have some old political maps detailing small squabbles over land for where the place is and a stack of newspapers to dig through which could take some time. They haven't aged well, poor paper quality, you know how cheap print goes."

"And?"

"Right. *Immanent doom approaching*. If we are to believe the report, and as far as I can tell with next to no direct information otherwise... yes, this young woman has used powers matching the descriptions in old folklore."

"Oh to be a fly on the wall following how her life has developed... Where is this place specifically?"

"I double checked against our maps..."

Grabbing his staff and pulling out a small wood bauble he used the top of the stone holder to push it across the table to rest right next to the major mountain range marking the absolute furthest north Imperial influence had ever gone in the centuries its stood. Five hundred years ago. Currently the border was the river Honnouji was in and even this was a recent development.

"Unfortunately farther north than a simple leisure expedition or path of conquest could realistically go without raising a lot of questions back home. We'll need to move without drawing attention to ourselves. The place consists of two maybe three hundred people living on farmland carved out of a valley several kilometers deep into the vast northern woods. One pass leads in and a sizable ancient woodland that has remained untouched for generations and separates them from the Dragon's teeth mountains on almost all sides. By horse about a month of travel for a small squad of scouts."

"Sounds doable. Ira?"

"Yes Lady Satsuki?"

"I'll need to leave someone in charge of things here while we go find this person of interest. Can I count on you to insure Honnouji remains intact no matter what happens in my absence?"

"Milady I, Ira Gamagori, am the imperial shield! This fortress will stand for the next thousand years if required on my honor as a member of the Gamagori family of smiths so I vow!"

Rubbing her ears from the ringing Nonon shot him a glare before slapping him for yelling so close to her head. Young mage still standing at the other end of the table spun his staff around to hold sideways along the small of his back after clearing his throat.

"Respectfully Lady Satsuki this would be an expedition to find a single person who may or may not actually exist *as it is*. Putting aside the list of ways this could go wrong, is it really wise to take this present course of action and have you confront a *described as violent* mage knowledgeable in who knows what *personally* without significant backup?"

"As a novice caster you know the power of a spellweaver firsthand, as a scholar you should know the stories from times of old regarding the strength of *the broken people's arts*. Powers so destructive and unspeakably wicked that they had been deemed the work of Hell. Something we are trying to attempt to stop from being unleashed *and actively sit over potentially*. It would be prudent to take the only option available to us at this time lest we find ourselves on the receiving end of that destruction. Too late to do anything else about it. This witch might know what's needed, so I must go find her."

"I know the myths, but that's all they are. Fiction, fantasy. Say we find this reportedly all powerful mysterious witch though, how could we be so sure she actually knows anything about the crypt? What the Empress is planning? Let alone willing to even talk with us at all. There are just so many unknowns here."

"If there were any simpler way forward I would have chosen that instead a while ago. *You know the stakes* and rest assured what my *mother* is planning is no fairy-tale. Whether it works or not doesn't matter for now. We must do everything in our power to ensure we succeed and for *that* we need real *old blood*. Or the streets will be painted with enough *fresh new blood* to drown the countryside. I'm going and that's final."

"*To defeat evil one must know evil*. Gods have mercy upon us."

"I didn't know you were a practitioner?"

"I'm not, but we are *as you admit* actively searching for a power only ever described as *unholy damnation*. If there are any deities

out there willing to smite us for such an offense against nature we can only hope they understand why we are doing this and let us proceed without complications."

"...Amen to that. Anyone have any questions?"

Around the table there was silence. Everybody was onboard. With a nod her knights stood, saluted, and went about preparing. One to take temporary command, three to start packing for their journey.

Eventually the group of four disguised in simple military uniforms belonging to her own scouting corp and packed for the journey boarded a small boat that took them from the docks of Honnouji and deposited them in a town on the northern bank.

Pushing onward with some horses bought for travel Houka used his staff to cast a defensive ward that obscured them from view in a brief flash of light. Moving field following the stone as it went making them appear as nothing more than a bubble of distortion over the land around them.

Unfortunately someone was already on their tail. Giggling to herself she had been tasked by her master to study *The princess* and see what she was really up to over the last few months in her *sand castle*. She had been watching frustratingly from shore and spotted them leaving. Curiously alone with her *friends* and with no fanfare. Unable to hear them from distance she was dashing from tree to tree at speeds above what any human should be able to achieve thanks to some very special equipment granted to her for her service to the crown over the last thirty odd years.

Giving chase to the group she was more than sure that *little frowny brows* was up to no good anyway.

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As they made their way north-west Satsuki had learned through the efforts of her information specialist that the whole region had been fractured when a small kingdom failed to coalesce under a minor king further north beyond the mountains and a sudden turn of violence from the people spread chaos and suspicion for some years. In that fighting the man's heir disappeared without a trace leaving what groups that were left standing victorious to establish a number of city states, consequently many of these towns simply welcomed the traveling *adventurers* with cautious open

arms uncaring what banner they served so they could bring much needed business to local inns and general goods stores where they occasionally stopped to restock on things. Houka drawing a map of places of interest to someday explore based on local legends of tombs and ruins as they went.

After weeks on the road they finally approached a particular valley, within which lay a particular small town, and the heart of the old growth forest from which it had been named. The focal point of a regional tall tale told by bar owners and retired mercenaries as they got closer and closer.

Somewhere among the densest trees of the Black forest where Aura's light could not bless a demon was living. A temptress clad in an unusual set of ornate armor which exposed a great deal of flawless skin who rode atop a pitch-black non-corporeal steed. Survivors claim she was quite a sight to behold, the memories of her form a prize for those who survived her unholy wrath. This helmeted female specter always appeared out of nowhere, dodged roots and arrows to ruthlessly kill off anyone who encroached on *her land*, then suddenly disappear as fast as she would come. Only leaving silence and the bloody corpses of dead and dying who had to desperately run to save themselves in her shadowy wake.

Satsuki Kiryuin did not believe in ghosts or demons. Which meant the request they were hinging this whole operation on was likely true. *Legends almost always have a hint of truth within.* Her search was conceivably over and the woman in question might very well live up to those myths of old.

Standing side by side they could see a church bell tower in the distance. Pushing north they entered the valley proper.

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Trotting up front of the four person staggered squad was Sanageyama. They would not be ambushed anytime soon with him on point. Behind him and to his right was Inumuta still carrying a sack of books alongside the standard field pack also on his back, staff in hand. Satsuki rode along behind his left. Her own black sword affixed to her belt grasping a small folded map and compass. She was playing the part of *pathfinder squad leader. Ma'am sufficed.* Behind her right was the most annoyed member of their party. Nonon brought up their rear and had been irritated at *living like a peasant* the whole way. Quiver of arrows on her lower back, bow across her shoulder, and several knives around her person at the ready she was to provide ranged covering fire in an engagement. Still wearing her usual black beret and dark leather

layers that she wore under her own half plate armor usually. Uniform stuffed into her pack somewhere much to Houka's dismay.

"You do realize that anyone that knows anything about professional military life will question why you're significantly under equipped, Snake."

"You can shove it if you think I'm putting on ten layers of shit in the middle of summer out in the middle of nowhere to find some angry busty tree-hugger that eats twigs and shits war Dog."

"Nonon, if you have grievances with my plans please feel free to tell them to my face."

"E-Excuse me ma'am. Apologies... But it's true isn't it? Magic is just magic, break the caster's stone or concentration and they can't fight. We have Dog and his *friends* already to back us up with fire and lightning if things come to blows later in the year, how valuable could one single woman be to figuring out some junk about dusty bones surrounded by shit no one can read?"

"We are here to find a potentially *irreplaceable* asset to the war effort, and you will not jeopardize that by spitting venom instead of maintaining our cover. That's an order."

"Yes ma'am... *Still a waste of time.*"

Continuing along the main road they left thin groupings of trees that had been common for the last week and started passing farm hands out weeding fields. Most stopping to stare at the procession as they went by. Eventually circles of children could be spotted following their progress from some distance on either side, dispersing as they approached the town proper. While it didn't have walls there was still a town guard. Several individuals in various mismatched armor bits brandishing spears and bows stopped them as the road went from dirt to cobblestone, the first farmhouses close by. Dismounting from her horse and walking to the head of their group Satsuki greeted a tall man of solid build wrapped in rusty chain-mail standing forward of the local defense line.

"Morning good sir, would you allow us entry into this town?"

"Names Ferdston. What's yer business?"

"We are long range scouts from the Honnouji army under the Imperial banner. We're passing through the countryside to map settlements and locations of interest. Several individuals along our way claimed there was some kind of violence here?"

"Imperials... Ah. I see. Just saying, we had nothing to do with how anyone who's tried to kill the witch have left. Stupid sods always ignore the warnings and get themselves killed by her. We're

a peaceful community a few hundred strong, we got wheat and barley, and a lot of the area's trappers stay with us when they hunt in the woods south. Used to have a trade mission that went north but... No one's had the nerve to try for a while. Not much else to tell ya."

"We would like to have a look around for ourselves if you and your town wouldn't mind our investigation of course."

"So long as you keep yer nose clean we don't care if you stop through here. Lord knows the inn could use the coin if yer staying more than a day. Not my business if you die being stupid though. Yer free to come and go, just don't give us a reason to kick you out or chain you up in iron for a caravan to haul away with the excess harvest."

"We don't intend to die or become slaves I assure you. We are simply here for information and will not intentionally be a nuisance if we can help it. Now in my own opinion getting a word in from the source of some of those rumors should be a priority if possible. Is there any way to speak with this *witch*?"

"If you actually want to speak to that *woman-shaped-thing* yer daft. I was with the only group led by Father Orion who's spoken with her and she just muttered some nonsense before butchering words of warning and contempt back at him. If you really want to know about the she-devil, just head up the road and into the town square. You can't miss the parish doors and Father should be there all day."

"I'll take it under consideration. We're still going to look for anything first hand though."

"I honestly wish you luck Miss Imperial, but if you go into those damn woods there's not going to be a rescue party to save yer skin."

"I understand and we'll be fine, thank you. Forward people."

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Sending Inumuta to inquire with the locals after leaving their horses with a stable Satsuki and her two remaining troops followed the map further north. Leaving town they walked past more fields and a patch of overgrown weeds before confronting a wall of heavy vegetation notably taller than anything growing along the way. Light within relegated to only single shafts illuminating the dark place due to its thick canopy of leaves. Following road as it

turned alongside the old growth they stopped to investigate a hole through it. Sanageyama moving in a couple feet to pick up on any details.

"A path cut down to move men through. Footprints point in both directions. Many in, few out. Specks of dry blood on the leaves not washed away by that rain two weeks ago means it's recent. Someone definitely came through here and lost a fight Lady Satsuki."

"Then here is a good place to pick up her trail."

"Ma'am I was not sure what to think before, but now I'm actually worried."

"Why?"

"If it's been days and if the stories about no one entering these woods is true... We're downwind, we should be able to smell at least a hint the corpses these guys left behind by now."

"Unless someone or something removed them."

"...Honest recommendation we go in weapons drawn. This just *feels* wrong. Either it's wildlife or the target took them herself for *who knows what*."

"We won't learn anything just standing around here. Blades out, lead us in Uzu."

Pulling his longsword free from it's leather holder he swallowed a nervous feeling and scoured the ground deeper into the greenery until he picked up the path of broken twigs. Satsuki holding her own black blade while Nonon readied an arrow to draw when needed they were on high alert as they officially passed into the so called *witch's realm*.

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Back south Inumuta was in the right place at the right time. It was just before noon as he made his way into a quickly filling main square in the town's heart. Dozens of market stalls and hundreds of people getting lunch or buying goods going about their day. Just enough of them curious about the blue haired visitor with staff in hand to give him plenty of minds to ply for information regarding the area and his Lady's target of fascination. Or so it should have been.

Slowly making his way toward the largest stone building he had seen so far at the far end of the square he managed to hold a

number conversations, multiple at once in several instances, in which he learned everything from the town's major exports.

Food, furs, and wood. New wood traded when surrounded by old forest? Odd.

To how many different stores he would have to investigate later for some useful items.

Small town yet three bookstores, two stocked from old dusty tomes from years of traders. Next priority. Might have studies in spells to read through.

To the local culinary specialties and locations of interest for travelers.

One major inn, usually serve all kinds, current possible place to stay the night, check offerings to ensure Monkey stays sober.

Just about everything under the sun except information pertaining to the woman in the woods. Each and every time he tried to get a word in asking about her all he got in response was grumblings about a *wretched existence* and redirection to what an impressive looking traveler from the Imperial cities should be interested in instead.

By the time he made his way into the church all he knew about the topic at hand was that the locals *really* didn't want to talk about a *local heretic*. Which in it's own way was quite a valuable thing to know as he approached an old man kneeling before a gold and quartz alter dedicated to the god of righteousness, oblivious to the world outside some prayer to the *Lord of light, Aura*, on high. It would be rude to interrupt but he was given an order to mine for information. So he cleared his throat to ensure he sounded friendly enough while making his way past rows of pews down the center aisle.

"I do apologize for the intrusion Father *Orion*, I take it? I was wondering if I could have a word with the pastor."

Standing up the old priest turned around to look him up and down. Lingering on his hair and equipment.

"I live to serve this congregation and all those under The Maker's holy creation. If a shepherd finds a lost sheep they do not cast it out to the wolves. I would be happy to spare some time to chat. But first tell me young man, what disciplines are you studying?"

"I unfortunately have only so much time in my day to day, so direct study under teachers is rare. I did my time with the college in Ventia under master enchanter Drofus to learn the basics though and I am versed in minor illusions, healing, and an odd destructive cast which is admittedly more smoke than actual

fire but it scares away the unwanted attention of nocturnal predators."

"A soldier versed in non-combat spells and no other weapon at hand?"

"Apologies. Houka of Imperial forward reconnaissance first battalion, Father. While service was compulsory if we need to engage in bloodshed then we've done something wrong. Our squad is small with a member ill back with the rest of the army but we're well trained enough to have avoided violence thus far and we pray that our fortunes continue as such until our service is done in a few years."

"Dyed hair?"

"Just because we serve does not mean we can't keep up with the fashions back home. One of my friends got a job in the capital and he sends us some things on occasion alongside letters back and forth."

At that a small smile stretched on the man's sunken face. Calculated lies mixed with truths earning him a motion to join for a nice conversation over a simple lunch in the attached residence.

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"T-The hell!?"

"I do believe we have stumbled into a graveyard. You did at least."

"I didn't trip Lady Satsuki! I just... needed to take a look at the tracks closer."

They had been walking, mercifully in darkness that shielded them from direct sunlight, through noon. Passing through an area full of broken vegetation they recognized as a battlefield. With no bodies to be seen. Continuing on there was a visible path they had been dragged along deeper into the woods. And one set of very shallow barefoot women's footprints. This tracking stopped when Uzu stepped through some brush and literally came face to face with their next clue, immediately leaping back up to his feet after he spied a four pointed wooden star shoved into the earth at the other end of the small pile of disturbed dirt he landed on. Looking around the forest clearing they counted almost sixty such items lined up in neat rows. Space left between the end of the graves on one side and the markers of the next so one could walk down the row without disrespectfully stepping on the plots themselves. Which ran counter to what little they had

learned of the individual likely responsible.

"The unfortunate men who cleared the path for us *and then some* I assume."

Re-sheathing blade Satsuki made her way up and down the rows to study them all in detail. Noting at the base of each and every one of the new additions was a yellow wildflower held down under a polished rock to keep it in place. While unsure of what the deceased's individual personal beliefs were, they were all laid to rest with what appeared to be full rights in the name of Aura.

"I can't imagine it's easy to go and do this all alone. This took time and effort. Killed by a *heretic* yet laid to rest with painstaking respect... At least we know what happened to the bodies. Nonon do you have the time? It would be unfortunate if we were to be late getting back."

Still standing next to Uzu near the clearing's entrance she reached into her collar to pull out an ornate necklace, round pendant popping open at the press of a hidden button to display a gemstone clock face inside.

"Sixteen minutes to four. We need to be back in that square by nine or so?"

"Counting for the careful moving that can be hastened on the return segment of this expedition we should be able to continue until five or six and make it back."

Stooping over Satsuki picked up one of the smooth stones. Waving over their tracker to hand it over to him.

"Tell me Uzu, do you by any chance hear the babbling of a brook somewhere nearby?"

Holding the dark item he rolled it between his fingers before getting her point.

"Smoothed by water? Not something you usually find in the middle of the woods."

"I would guess it's likely her source of drinking water as well. Which means if we find a stream..."

"We find her."

"Well?"

Standing up he closed his eyes and waited for a lull in the breeze. Letting his trained senses stretch past the still graves, past the large trees, to pick up on two pieces of information.

"North?-east there might be some water, but before we go Lady Satsuki have you noticed something?"

"What?"

"There's no birds. No hawks, no songbirds, no crows to pick the bodies before burial. This place is completely empty. Why?"

"That is a question we will have to save for either a local expert or our studious informant snooping about town. For now we keep going."

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With sun beginning to fall she finally spotted her person of interest. Finding a small winding water way as anticipated they followed along it's path as best they could, significant effort that had involved climbing several obstacles paying off when they saw another large clearing ahead of them full of sunlight. More importantly a black hooded figure sitting in it's middle on an embankment of the stream. Ordering her two elite to wait behind the treeline Satsuki affixed sword to her belt and strode forth alone. She would rather avoid a fight with someone so potentially vital if it could be helped. Walking she made it to within a few meters of the person's back before a deep feminine voice called out to her.

"Oi, stop right there with yer shitty clanking equipment before I-Fuck, um... Er.. I meam- mean, Stop yer... clanging noises."

It's real!

Genuine conversational *Sylvan*. The language of the *old ones*, *Elves*. And rumored older *Fae* of legend. The first a race of beings dead at the hands of human ambition though the rare half-breeds can still be found being bought and sold among the sex slave markets for their attractive features or hiding among the people with their ears cut. The second was argued back and forth by scholars on whether or not they ever actually existed. Beings that were the first to walk the land with more than an animal's mind, channeled magic as easily as everyone else could breath air. This young woman was living proof that at least the language was real. Utterly fascinated Satsuki now had to convince her to help them. Unsure if she could move without upsetting her she attempted to speak from where she stood.

"The... witch of Ironwood I presume?"

Thankfully after hearing a range of noises from her throat the form started speaking roughly but understandably.

"I... am what I am. Fuck off. If you've come to kill me, then draw noisy blade. You fuckers try though and you die. Oh I know about the other two, two other, assholes camped over in the trees. Leave."

"No, nothing of the sort. I've come--"

She was cut off by a frantic shushing. Cloaked figure before her getting up with a crooked wooden spear to stoop over the water. Standing still and ready to throw the thing down into its surface. Graceful arm raised to her right completely bare save for some cloth wrapped around her right wrist.

"...What are you doing?"

That was the wrong time to ask. Words coming out as the wood was hurled downward, and evidently missed it's target. Chain of loud profanities in two languages echoing as the form dove in after it headfirst. Loud splashing movements erupting from where she struggled in the waist deep water for a brief moment which ended with a loud yell of irritation.

"Son of a bitch the first fucking fish in this stupid stream in over a year was right there! Two fucking hours... wasted. Shit... Damn it. Grrr..."

"Were you... *fishing*? In the middle of the woods?"

As the young woman in black dragged herself up onto the grassy bank she spat back a sarcastic "Ya think **dumbass!**?... *Dumbass.*" before standing up and wringing water out of what little clothing she wore. Surprisingly adept at doing all of that without letting her hood drop.

Studying her was easy enough while she squeezed the strange leather material of her cloak in places. And the stories weren't wrong, from what she could see the woman really was nothing short of a perfect figure. They were about the same height, body an evenly filled hourglass but toned from an active life. Scandalously short skirt reminiscent of *courtesans* Mother kept around low on her hips, nothing else but cloth bandages wrapped around ankles, arms, and conceivably ample chest. Flawless skin completely unmarked even after living surrounded by hostile woods radiated with life. Particularly of note her hands looked far too soft to be a person of the land. Or practiced in combat enough to kill over fifty people with them. It was as if a young noble had sold all her possessions and moved into a mud hut the day prior to their arrival.

Or she was really an elf.

Looking her over Satsuki was drawn to her face to find the most

unusual aspects of her appearance. A pair of striking blue disks just under shocks of vibrant translucent red hair in among visible mop of otherwise pure black. Her hands tugging the front of her hood back down over the glass like bangs while those eyes narrowed at her.

"Ruined dinner... Get the fuck out of my woods before I end you like the last fucks!"

Slapping a hand offered to help pull her up the bank aside the dark silhouette stomped over to her likely abode with silent feet and shoved her way through the entrance. Turning around in more angry annoyance when Satsuki followed her and stopped the wooden door before it could close more than halfway.

"I told you to leave and this is gonna be yer last warning-... Eyebrows!"

"I just want to talk with you miss, apologize now at the very least."

She looked taken aback. No longer outright angry but still heavily skeptical. Satsuki needed to proceed cautiously.

"Considering this recent development allow me to feed you in repayment of my error."

Warily the still unnamed young woman let go of the door and turned to stare into the darkness of her hovel under a tree. Particularly the large fire pit in it's center that was currently empty. Hooks above for drying meat bare. Turning her head back she asked only one flat question. Practice from talking to herself paying off while letting words calmly come back to her.

"Who are you?"

Satsuki gave a slight bow before an apology for forgetting her manners.

"Kiryuin Satsuki, ruler of Honnouji."

"Never heard it- of, it."

"It's a recent development within the Empire some ways south of here. Given your *probable* rate of interaction with society at large I don't suppose you would have."

She seemed to have struck a nerve with the last statement as one rather strange blue eye twitched at the mention of her possible seclusion. She would have to diffuse this misstep *immediately*. Putting her hands up and calling up old memories of even older books in the royal library she hoped her pronunciation was at least remotely passable while the girl's frown returned. Some

force prickling senses somewhere around them as a cold dark smoke started creeping around their feet.

"I'm sorry!"

Her anger disappeared in an instant along with the growing darkness. Silently mouthing the words herself multiple times with a slow step forward. Responding quietly with wide eyes.

"Y-You actually know this?"

"Ah... Before you continue I'm afraid my knowledge of the old tongue is limited to small written phrases, I hope that apology was correct. It's extremely difficult trying to decipher Sylvan let alone attempt to speak it without materials to learn from. Regarding my comments I sincerely meant no disrespect. I'm sorry that was rude. Was it a wrong assumption on my part?"

It was for only a moment but there was a very noticeable flash of interest on her face that was replaced by another small frown and slump in her shoulders. Eventually sighing before letting out a barely audible "No." Turning around she shuffled further in and crouched down to inspect a bunch of rough pots under a small table.

"...Leave."

"I just want to talk."

"And I just want some peace and quiet but I can never have *that* now can I! Nooo everyone comes to bother me. *Kill me*. I tell them to piss off. One of the last group came up to try and cop feel instead! So I lopped his arm off before he could. The rest of them got offended at that. And now *you're* here bothering me! *I just want to be left alone damn it.*"

"Might I inquire why? You don't strike me as the usual hermit living alone collecting plants. Surely a young woman such as yourself would rather live somewhere more civilized than this?"

"*You don't know me...*"

"No, I don't. Nor can I ever claim to if you don't give me the chance--"

"I don't need you. I don't need to know anyone. Just fucking leave before I'm forced to make you!"

"No one?"

Stomping back over and staring deep into Satsuki's face her eyes were outright glowing blue. Hair following with a soft red under her hood.

"Humans are fucking persistent assholes. Like you! Fucking leave before I put you in the ground!"

"Humans?"

She opened her mouth to yell but nothing but a rush of air came out. Snapping mouth shut she pulled cloak closed from the inside and took a step back.

She had said too much.

"...How did you find this place? It's impossible to get here on foot."

"We found the cemetery I'm assuming you maintain. The stream was nearby so we followed it here."

"That's not an easy thing to do with packs and shit."

"We persevered because I need to talk to you."

"...Why?"

"Your reputation precedes you. They say you're capable of some very unique forms of magic. Very *old* forms of magic. And it sounds like you know Sylv."

"And knowing *that* you came here anyway?"

"You have so far not attacked us recklessly which when factored in with the well maintained graves I would think you didn't start the fights which cut the lives within it short. If you do not wish to go back to town with us, fine, I'll cut to the chase. We need someone who has a complete knowledge of Sylvan to help us with an archaeological dig."

"You came all the way here... To tell me you need someone to dig up some old bones for you?"

"No, manual labor has been covered for some time now. We just need an interpreter to tell us what we actually found. Read the words carved all over the place. For any service rendered I am prepared to compensate you significantly for the work."

She turned around and grabbed the door again.

"I'll pass, leave."

"Ten imperial platinum pieces *a day* once the work starts."

"That's supposed to entice me?"

"A soldiers wage is two silver a day. twenty silvers is a gold. A hundred gold is a platinum. Only banks deal in it normally. I'm offering you a thousand gold a day to just translate stone carvings for us. You could buy a fully furnished two bedroom freestanding house in the *capital* in a week. It's not a hard job there is just no one else we can find who can do it."

"Do I look like I give two fucks about money? I couldn't spend it if I wanted to..."

"And why is that?"

"...Just fucking leave."

"Seeing as the sun is setting would you at least join me for dinner? Maybe we could work something-"

"No and no. For the last time no! Take your assholes and leave."

Before she could get another word in the door was slammed in her face. No answer came to her knocking or loud pleading. Finally Satsuki yelled out that she would be back tomorrow along with a last apology and pulled off her pack. Extracting various small bundles and putting them in a metal cup of sorts meant for boiling water by campfire. Leaving the clearing she headed back to town with her knights in tow. All three oblivious to the woman curled up on a cot of hay swearing under her breath every time her stomach gurgled.

For months now game had gotten more and more sparse. The local deer were gone, birds chased away by arrows or *something* migrating north constantly as the years went on, and she knew nothing of farming. Her last scrap of dried meat was eaten days ago.

Her thoughts turned to the offer of food. A free meal. She stamped them out mercilessly. This *Satsuki* just wanted to trick her. It was just an offer too good to be true. Lure her out and then ensnare her in a trap like the lumberjack wannabe slavers years ago. She didn't need people, she'd managed to survive on her own so far without them. And she intended to keep it that way.

"*Stupid hunters slaughtering the stupid deer like there was an infinite amount of them when they leave the stupid woods... Damn them. Damn them all...*"

Until another hunger pain racked her frame. She was weak and she knew it. That last group of mercs had taken an actual fight to repulse, had this new chick ambushed her with arrows it might have actually injured her. And that was something she could never afford to let happen. Groaning loudly she rolled off the cot. Climbing her way upward in the space she pulled material away from

a small window hidden at the base of the tree and studied her immediate domain. Coast clear she dropped to the floor, regretted doing so, and shoved her way to the door. Cracking it open she scanned the field before spotting the bundle at her doorstep. Getting down to her knees she sucked down her pride, took the thing inside, and moved to her fireplace to study it.

Chapter End Notes

Enter the varied Knights of Honnouji and we have contact, unfortunately not how Satsuki wanted it to go, but contact nonetheless.

Messed with ages a little so things might make some more sense. Kept a bunch of "facts" from the show though with edits where needed.

Hope the world building is understandable/reasonable. New to having to make up a whole universe of places and OCs basically. Also hope I haven't accidentally copied a name from somewhere else.

Now to figure out how to tag this thing.

Change on the wind

Chapter Summary

Beds, books, and a burdened witch

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Rumor of the latest witch hunt had circulated among the locals. This was almost a monthly occurrence now, but this time people got interested in the details. Actual troops from *the Empire* itself poking around looking for *her*. Group returning to civilization they passed shops and houses along cobblestone streets, people doing double takes as they passed upon remembering half heard gossip through the day. Staring at them with varying expressions of confusion and respect for still breathing but went back to their daily lives. Very few people had seen the witch and lived, they either didn't enter the woods or the gods smiled down on them to prevent a meeting at all. Regardless the people gave them a wide berth as they moved toward their next destination. Just off the town square Satsuki looked around for a blue head while the area was becoming deserted. Window shutters being closed and market stalls getting packed up for the night.

From a side alleyway Inumuta appeared with a new bag of reading material in one hand and glowing with mage light staff in the other on time.

"How did your task go?"

"In some ways better than expected in others not so much. I've hopefully learned some useful information, if not I've got quite the bit of reading ahead of me which *might* prove more or less useful after clearing out any books of note available for sale in town Ma'am. How did things go on your end?"

"Not much better I'm afraid."

"Nothing?"

"Oh no we definitely found the woman and she lives up to at least some of the rumors. I can even confirm that she does speak Sylv, *and quite frankly she's the most gorgeous person I've ever seen...* However. She's just completely and utterly uninterested in even ludicrous amounts of coin or discussion at all."

"Then the priest's words were true. Against all odds she actually exists. A recluse from human society? *Would fit given history of conflict and current circumstance.* Sounds about right unfortunately for us. So many things I need to ask about her side of the story. What forgotten knowledge she knows."

"Oh?"

"People that would actually stay on topic had some very choice words about her *life* around here after she showed up around twelve years ago. To avoid making a scene I would recommend further discussion continued in private."

Following his directions they found a long building near the square with a sign advertising ale. Entering the inn more than one table went quiet after getting a look at the newcomers but eventually turned back to their own discussions and business. Ignoring the pause Satsuki went up to the bar and got the attention of a portly man behind it.

"Welcome! How can I help you little lady? I've got everything travelers need."

"You're the owner?"

"Yup! Will it be food, drink, or..."

Tilting his head to the side he looked past her toward Uzu, man currently eyeing one of the waitresses bent over wiping a table clean.

"Lodging?"

"All three if there are any private rooms for a party of five or six available... *Excuse me?*"

Raising an annoyed eyebrow at him he kept staring past her. Turning she followed where he was looking, tapping their swordsman on the shoulder he nervously snapped to attention away from the girl winking at him with a blush. She turned back to the inn-keeper and broke his own hardening stare with a small forced cough to keep them on track.

"Is there a room of sufficient size available or not?"

"Yeah. Merchant suite at the end of the floor isn't filled."

Walking down the bar he opened up a small lock-box underneath to pull out a large key ring. Removing two identical metal keys he slipped the first onto another ring holding a dozen already on his waist and came back to put the second attached to a gray strip of cloth down on the bar in front of her.

"How many nights ya in for?"

"Not sure. Assuming a few days at least for now until our business is concluded. Can we eat up there?"

"Its got a table with seats for six. More if you have others with yer group that want to cram in but only six beds. Anything more is your problem. I'll send Wendy along to get you sorted. This time of year is usually quiet enough so stay long as you like and pay by the day long as you need, full ale for the lads?"

"Light *all around*, we can't be hungover tomorrow."

"Alright. Room will be twenty copper for full service with simple meals including breakfast in the morn. Lockup's at midnight and open around five."

Digging into a pocket on her belt she pulled out coins and swapped them for the key. He didn't release the strip attached to it just yet though. He jerked his head so she would lean over and spoke a bit lower.

"That *doesn't* include *service* if you get me. They're decent girls working here. If you're looking for *entertainment* for the blokes *that's not you* I need to send a runner out and it's gonna cost extra."

"Good *sir*, I can assure you that will *not* be necessary. *We* are soldiers on duty."

The edge in her voice made her point clear to the man as he shuddered a little under her glare. Finally handing the key over he called for a young teenager who skipped over with a smile and wide eyes. Introducing herself with a click of her shoes and a mock salute for the *real professional soldiers* she led them up a set of stairs and down the hall to a door at the end of the floor. Inside the full suite had a large open common space that took up a full corner of the building split into a general dining and a sitting area. Windows facing out toward the main square on two sides. The wall to the left of their entrance held four more doors that led to three smaller rooms containing two beds each and at the far end a bathroom with full set of amenities in the forth. Making a beeline to get first dibs on the unexpectedly *civilized facilities* Nonon locked herself in there to start washing off sweat and dirt from their trip so far. Waitress sent away to start gathering drinks and dishes the two men shrugged and went into the room next to the bath to start removing packs and excess parts of their uniforms.

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With a snap of her fingers and a thought of *Ignite* wood sparked into a modest fire that illuminated her one room hovel. Legs crossed under her on a cushion of skins she turned the metal thing in her grasp around to try and figure out what it was. Settling in she pulled out her *speech aid* from the dark of her cloak. Giving the worn pink blob of stuffing with a curly tail a gentle squeeze before setting it down so black button eyes could look up at her. Focusing back on task she turned the tin over to dump it's contents on a stone shelf that served as her general purpose counter space. Four balls of fabric fell out, the last clattering on impact suspiciously. Putting tin down she checked that one first. Longer than the others and marginally heavier. Unfolding cream colored cloth she found a silver fork and knife set.

"Really?"

She frowned but spun them around in her hands to hold properly.

"*They're not that great...* Okay I admit it they're a lot better than my own tries at utensils, happy?"

Begrudgingly admitting they were leagues better than the rough carved things she tried to make out of bone she turned and stuck her tongue out down at the silent toy pig. Twirling pair again she set them down in their proper places, reaching into her cloak she pulled out a round slate stone she used as a plate and set it between them. This was surrendering to herself and it almost physically hurt to do, unfortunately to do otherwise would be to let herself starve. So she was going to at least do things *properly*. Untying the remaining bundles she found a potato rapidly sliced open and baked with another simple thought while holding. The next some strips of dried meat that started to make her mouth water with a rich smell of smoke and earthy spice.

"You know what kind this is?... Me neither. Who cares though, *meat!*"

Down to the last bundle it revealed a small block of spongy material she couldn't figure out until a piece crumbled off and brought heavy memories flooding back.

It was bread. *Real bread*. It was dry and completely tasteless, it was honestly terrible. She still almost swallowed it whole on the spot. Eyes watered as thoughts of a particular metal stove came back to her. Yearning painful pangs in her chest for *Nanna's baking*. Of days spent going about without a care as her kind was oft to do in the days before the first era, learning about anything she could get her hands on with the help of Nanna who was allowed to use the ladders to pull out books on the *toppy shelves*.

Holding the last pinch of stiff material in her hand she placed it on the slab next to her plate and stared at it with wet eyes, devouring the rest of the food as fast as it would go down with the aid of proper cutlery. Notion of a possible *poison* be damned. She would live another couple weeks. But then what?

It was summer and she had already depleted everything edible in the place. With fall coming she would normally be able to restock, but this year already looked grim. Fall and winter she could coast by but what about the next spring after? What if it was another drought like two years ago where she was so weak she almost never left bed? Looking around at clay walls decorated with her pitiful attempts at jewelry made of river rocks and stick figure flowers drawn before hitting it all with fire to harden her frown grew deeper and deeper. She'd made it thus far on magic, sweat, and what little outdoors knowledge she got out of uncle Mohawk when she was something around five. Even after Nanna chased them back into the cabin when he tried to give her a bow to shoot that last winter together.

Uncle Mohawk.

She was competent now but honestly not an absolute expert of everything outdoorsy, not like him. He knew what mushrooms and plants you could eat year round, how to track a deer for days without magic or inhumanly light steps, and how to start a fire with nothing more than a pair of twigs. She was technically *living* out here sure, and figured out a huge number of things through trial and error to great success, but she was really just surviving. Fighting off violent assholes year after year while constantly fighting off hunger. The only reason she wasn't just skin and bones, or *dead*, was her damn *bloodline*.

Setting the silverware down she picked up her plate and the bread. Weighing them in outstretched palms like a set of fine scales until the sun's light disappeared from the far wall through what windows she had.

"What do you think old buddy?... *Hmm?... Mmmhmm... True... We don't have to stay.*"

Finally coming to a decision she placed the stone down and swallowed the bread in a bite. Potato skin tossed into the fireplace she slapped both hands down on the slab rattling the items on it while the brown scrap burned, her mind made up. Carefully she packed the fabric and metal items back up in the curved pot and stashed it in her storage void. Gently taking her trusty pig in hand she got up and grabbed a water skin. Dousing the burning wood with a slosh that sent ash all over the floor to collect in old broken channels now baked in. One by one grabbing what few possessions she let sit around to stuff into the cloak as well for a trip.

Outside in the dark lit by fireflies and small balls of magic that eddied like water in the stream she closed the door and with her free finger drew a shape on it's surface that sucked in some of the ethereal light. Rune momentarily glowed blue before the front of the whole structure turned into nothing more than a brown haze of obscured thoughts when observed. Safe until she got back.

"Don't wuss out on me now. We've snuck out plenty of times! *Plenty of times... That ended j-just fine the last time... yeah. It didn't, didn't it.*"

Guided by the stars before her nerve could waver she turned south and walked beside water to leave the glade. Obstacles passed as a cloud of darkness within the mostly light barren woods. Traveling farther than land memorized her legs stopped when toes fell side by side in the last line of grass and weeds along a pale dirt road. Perfect rows of planted fast growing trees were directly across. Taking a deep breath she looked down into the reassuring buttons staring up from the crook of her arm and crossed the border. Mildly annoyed at the occasional rock under foot she followed the man made path. Rustling fields of grain under the rising moon beckoning her forward as they swayed in the wind toward buildings with soft yellow glows in their windows.

This was just a *visit*. Her first ever such trip outside the woods on reflection. She just wanted to see how things were in the so claimed *civilized society* that kept sending *people* to butcher or sell her. How *they* were *surviving*.

And maybe return the silverware without Eyebrows noticing.

Nanna always said *give back what you borrow*.

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She was nearly invisible against the black sky. Pig safely stashed back in his place she landed softly on rooftop after rooftop much like moving from tree limb to tree limb in the woods. Unnoticed by the residents underneath her feet she was trying, *and failing*, to make heads or tails of the place. She could figure that the big stone building with the tower was the local church she decided against leveling on the spot but other than *that* everything looked the same. Every house, every shop, and every cobble street was all made in the same style from the same materials. The dark cover of alleyways abandoned in frustration she had moved upward to get a better view of the place. Not that her vantage point just above the buzzing of lives helped figure the place out, or her mood.

Everywhere she looked people were going home or eating dinner with their families. She'd been just able to keep herself fed for years and every single one of these people were stuffing themselves happy as could be without a care in the world. They weren't fighting, they weren't *suffering* with some need. Yet they for years have tried to drive her from the woods. Woods that it looks like they didn't need *what so ever*. Looping back to the main square she stopped on a corner rooftop and sat down in a huff against a chimney. *Blood boiling furious.*

Spoiled fuckers everywhere... And they have the fucking nerve to try and force me out!? For what! What do they need!? They already have everything!

Clenching a fist she aimed at a chimney nearby that she wanted to belt a solid hit on and shatter. Pulverize the thing until it was dust. Just a hair away from opening up a hell storm of fury on the town as a whole, drive them from *their* homes to see how *they* liked it.

But the old reminders from Nanna always came back.

...You can't just break things when you feel like it Ryu. Things can't fix themselves, humans don't always heal. How would you feel if someone broke your toys or ripped the books when they felt like it? Go ask the cooks for a broom, I'll help you clean this up now but you can't do this again, okay?...

Her fist slowed until it lightly tapped the bricks. Forehead leaning against it she let herself calm down. It wouldn't help to waste the effort or completely destroy her bones like an idiot. Focused back on her task she turned to face the horizon again.

Town is a town, she must have gone to a... what... Inn? That. What does an Inn look like though? Its gotta be big. Have rooms for people to sleep. Do they have more than one here? Do they have any? Fucking damn it... wait...

Her nose picked up something strong enough to break her jumbled thoughts and derail her completely again. Something familiar. Getting up she followed it to a building a street over from the square. Back on ground level there was still light coming from within the shop. Peering through an open square side window her heart skipped a beat. It was a bakery and the man in charge was still working somewhere in the back. Dozens of varying loaves just sitting in baskets near the sales counter waiting for someone to take them.

She wanted it.

Bad.

Biting her lip she thought about going for them. It was reckless, unnecessary, and could possibly start a war in the middle of enemy territory.

Fuck it.

Nature won out over nurture. Stepping into smoke she passed though the window. Solid again she reached for a roll but finally stopped her hand.

...Put it back Ryu. Someone put time and effort into making it and they sell it to buy things they need like food and clothing. If you want something ask for it and we pay for it fairly, I still have coins for a well behaved girl...

It was wrong. Even among the *gluttons* this guy made something to earn a living. Even if it was going to go stale and be turned into pudding or something the next morning. Already berating herself for caring she stuffed a hand into her cloak and pulled out a worn leather bag that lightly jingled as she opened it. Reaching into the purse she grabbed a fistful of metal and put it on the counter to study. Frowning when all of them looked different.

Some were big, some small. Brown, shiny silver, and gold alike. She had no idea what they individually were or where they came from, she had just taken them along with anything non-perishable and intact off the people that came for her head. Nanna never mentioned if it was still *stealing* if they were dead and didn't need to buy things anymore.

It must be fair if they wanted to kill her surely.

Too bad it was wrong to kill the baker right now. Picking up a small brown disk she turned it over, and recognized the insignia on the back. Satsuki had it on her belt buckle. It was a brown *Imperial thing*. Which made this likely a copper.

Standard something wage was what, silver? A little silver. This is just bread. It's food. One loaf has gotta be cheap, so... Copper. But how much of it...

None of the baskets had signs or any other indication of price or product everywhere she looked. And for the life of her she couldn't recall prices from over a decade ago the few times she got to see the market against father's wishes.

Why have useful information somewhere for those who need it, eh, asshole?

Known coin in one hand she pushed the rest into a single pile under her other on the counter. Quietly she willed red glyphs on her palms to form and gave silent instruction in whispers.

"Form of ore be free, follow the guidance of the master mold. Reshape."

In seconds the pile of various coins melted into red light. Reformed into uniform brown disks. Each a perfect replica of the coin in her left hand. Putting the one used as a master away she figured sixteen *had* to be enough.

"Hello? Oh! Didn't hear you come in can I help you?"

She froze with her head down. Jumped a little at the call from across the counter. She somehow missed the guy walk over from the back.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare ya miss!"

Her head inched upward while internally panicking until she could see his face. In turn he could see the front of her. Which made him put his hand on his chin with wide eyes.

"S-Say, who are you? Not from here *that's* for sure."

"***Uh...Uhh...***"

"No wait, I know who you are!"

She braced herself for a scream and a start to hostilities. Already thinking of how she could shut the man in a white apron up as efficiently as possible without ruining the bread with blood splatter. But she had no need.

"You're with those Imperials right? My cousin saw you guys this morning walking into town, woman with dark clothes. You don't have pink hair though that liar. Obviously red."

"Y-Yeah."

"Well, welcome to Ironwood friend! You won't find a better baker anywhere near here I promise. So what can I do for ya?"

She hadn't lied, she only answered a different question. With a need to get out she nervously pointed at the baskets between them.

"Fresh off the road, need a little rest, and some fresh bread! I get you. Rumors going around yer looking for the witch, can't fight on an empty stomach am I right!"

"Fights a... strong word."

"Oh right can't just go in there and *pow one, two, three, knockout* to haul her off to the fire. Tell you what normally this stuff that goes unsold I sell to my neighbor to make feed for his cows but that's a waste, cows don't deserve it. Heck I made some of this right before lunch its just been a slow day. Crying shame is what it is... Sorry, point is I'll give ya four loaves for three C."

"Oh, that not- you don't need to--"

"Nonsense! You are a beautiful young woman out in the world and you need bread! Bread that I won't sell for much anyway. In fact..."

He turned and headed into the back to pull out a small bundle and a cloth flour sack. Coming back out to the front he took a basket of loaves and put them in the fabric bag along with the extra item.

"Last slice of today's pie wrapped and ready to go. Got the apples in and had to make em into something. Was gonna have it after I got home but I believe in being a good man of the bakery! On the house for a lovely lady. Just don't tell anyone."

Silently she gathered the requested coins and deposited the rest in the purse to be tucked back into the storage void. Receiving a bag that smelled like heaven in exchange for the due payment.

"Anything else ya need? Don't hesitate to ask!"

"...*Actually*, the unit was... supposed to regroup in an *Inn*? I don't know where that... is."

"When you step outside hang a right then a left back to the square. From there just head to the first open right, one street down you can't miss it on the corner!"

It took her a second to remember another soft chiding made as an effort to help her work past *herself*.

"T-Thank... you."

"Don't mention it! And if yer ever in the neighborhood you know where to find the best bread in town! Have a good one, Aura with you."

Spinning on her heel with bag in hand she hurriedly walked out of the bakery. Blushing with a frown after hearing the guy mumble to himself as she left.

"*THAT's what city women look like!? Gods, I need to travel someday to see your bounty...*"

Street empty she turned into an alleyway to jump off opposing walls up to the roofs once more. Following the given directions she settled down behind a chimney across the street from a long building full of lights, sounds, and life. Trio of men stumbling around by the door already headed home from their night on the town. She had to get closer to figure out where Eyebrows was in there, *if* she was in there, but there was something to do first.

Sack brought out and opened she pulled out the small slice of pie. Unwrapped then mashed it into her mouth as fast as she could chew. Sweet, flaky, tender pastry filled her mouth with savory flavor. Nose with buttery warmth. She shuddered as long forgotten sugar hit her taste buds and dissolved. Fingers licked clean she sat there staring at them.

I'm getting... Fuck I miss real food... Stop, focus!

Tying the bag of bread back up before she could give in to its promises she shoved it into the darkness around her shoulders. Smell disappearing with it. Back on her mission she waited for the revelers in the street to be occupied with themselves, *or the floor she couldn't tell but it still worked*, and took a running leap to clear the gap.

Carefully she crawled around the roof and made her way over to the far side to start checking windows. It was at the other end she finally spotted them. One of them at least. From her upside-down vantage point peering through a window and open interior door she could see Satsuki sitting in a chair staring down deep into a cup of something billowing steam into her face.

Letting go of the roof with one hand while sliding down she pivoted herself to rotate into the wall, passing through the gaps in the window frame instead of smashing into it. Careful to stand in the shadows behind the door she re-solidified and dug around in her cloak. Tied bundle of metal pulled out she very carefully set it down on a bed to ensure it wouldn't make a sound. Letting it go when she was sure it was firmly on the bedding she nearly had a heart attack when a fork inside clattered. Luckily for her the main room's door opened at the same time, loud hinges protested a lack of oil as two other people walked in. Settling down in a crouch she listened into their conversation.

Might learn why they're really here.

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Plates empty and the overly nosy waitress sent away with them her trio had gone down to get a handful of small things while she made herself a cup of tea. Tiny red ruby enchanted to heat up on command drying next to her after being used to boil the water she was waiting to cool. They had gone over what they had

collectively learned thus far, and none of them had come up with a solution to their current problem.

There has to be SOMETHING that she wants.

Uzu settled at the bar with coins to spend and tales to impress women to spare left only two to come back and sit around the long table they had eaten on. Houka pulling out his small brown book now filled with notes gathered through the day from a pocket in his shirt. Already scribbling more ideas.

"So Lady Satsuki how shall we proceed?"

"You're the closest thing we have to an expert, suggestions?"

"Hardly an expert... *the witch though...* Basics. We need more data honestly."

Pulling eyes from her tea she rubbed her nose while Nonon took a deep pull from her mug. Distracting thoughts of skin *she had no idea from where they were coming from* pushed aside while trying to continue.

"Is it possible her more extreme looks you described came from being owned and not her heritage? Perhaps we could locate who did and buy her freedom."

"Aside from an exquisite cloak she was dressed in rags, but no shackles, tattoos, or branding you would find on an escaped slave changed for a *master's taste*. And they had to be real the only obvious magic that I could see was black smoke that felt like ice when she was upset."

"I'm still surprised that you angered her and *lived* given what's happened to everyone else."

"Not intentionally, apologized immediately as best I could like anyone should which seemed to calm her significantly. *Thankfully*. I have a feeling that there is a disconnect between both sides. The people claim she is just a violent demon. She strikes me as a rational sort that more or less explained she was tired of people trying to bother her. Us included."

"Yet current kill total estimates are around the upper forties--"

"Graveyard had fifty-eight stars if we neglected to mention that. Assumed humans."

"Interesting, but isn't better. Travelers or locals?"

"We didn't go around with shovels digging them up Dog."

"A pity."

"Ew."

"It's a valid way to learn how they were killed and where they originated. Back to the witch, now that we're back to basic info does she have a name? You have neglected to mention it as well thus far. Could help in figuring where she hails from originally which would be very useful in figuring what she could want from there regardless of what shape or form it takes."

Satsuki put down her cup and stopped to think about it. Leaning back she let her head fall.

"How did I neglect..."

"Satsuki are you sure she didn't do anything to you back there? You've been distracted all night. This isn't like you at all."

"I can assure both of you that I'm fine. *Must be stress...*"

"Maybe you should turn in early tonight?"

"I'm *fine*! No more of it. We need idea's on what we could offer to make her interested in the work. My health even if she *did* do something is secondary regardless."

"We could just knock her over the head and drag her back. She's an elf just smack her with your sword once and she'll be out like a light."

"Absolutely not Nonon. We're not harming the woman or anyone else if we don't have to."

"I must agree that violence is out of the question, too risky to directly attack her. The force required to shock the brain-stem could fracture an elf's neck doing that. Maybe some sedatives though--"

"We're not drugging her *either* Houka."

"Not even a little to make her more accepting of--"

"No. Real suggestions only."

"Well... Anything relating to history, magic study, property... a title?"

"Don't know, maybe, probable hard no, and what would a title do with no property or pay behind it?"

"Prestige and authority? You asked and it's in your power to grant."

"To a point."

"...True. That leaves us with magic. Tomes, artifacts, or instruction under tutors? Is she classically trained? Would she accept the aid of assistants? Maybe we could acquire some slaves for her..."

"Dog, *DOG*. Did you just honestly suggest we *buy people*, to give to an *elf*?"

"Just throwing out ideas. Maybe she'd get some personal joy from owning humans in a reversal of social order? I don't know."

"Oh *sure* and well just get her a whole closet of iron necklaces and matching bracelets. I'm positive she won't take *that* the wrong way!"

"Let's put *buying people* aside and go back to the simpler options. What do we already have and what could we offer back in Honnouji?"

"What about Nonon's clock, isn't it elven made?"

"Hey fuck you Dog how about we give her your staff!"

"I need that to cast, it's quite different."

"I'm not ditching a one of a kind heirloom that's been in the family for centuries!"

"Settle down people. I won't ask either of you to give up your private possessions unless absolutely necessary. We have a vault and a dig site, out of that we must have *something* back home that could be considered *interesting*."

Nonon shrugged and pointed her empty mug across the table.

"His department."

Getting up she stretched and headed out to return the glass and check on their *pick up* artist before he did something stupid. Closing his book of notes Houka went over to his bed and bag. Pulling out a ledger he readjusted his glasses and started going down lines. Calling out anything that might work.

"Preserved beast corpses for biological study?"

"Unlikely."

"Arms or armor? She sounds to be in need of a full set of armor given she wears one half naked. I'm sure we have some items that can be altered to fit her. Maybe a fine sword?"

"Already has her own equipment and yet to hear them not working no

matter how they have been described."

"They weren't sitting on a rack inside her home somewhere?"

"No. Probably has it all well hidden if it's fully enchanted... Maybe it's revealing out of necessity to allow ease of equipping? Without aid a suit of full plate would be difficult if not impossible to don. Especially not quickly."

"Speed... How about a wardrobe then? She was wearing rags right, I could write Shiro and see if he can come to Honnouji to do some work. We could add properties to make them into useful equipment like the Inquisitors do."

"Not a bad idea. Add that to a shortlist, what else?"

"Hmm... A general variety of staves, rings, amulets, and whatever you personally have locked away in the tower I don't know of."

Flipping pages he continued skimming inventory down the list hundreds of items long.

"I have a rough idea of it all but it will take some hours to pick out individual items of note ma'am. It *is* late so maybe you should rest and throw a fresh mind toward the problem tomorrow."

Her tea finished she looked out a window to see lights of others going out one by one. Thinking about it she reluctantly nodded and stood up.

"Sleep would be too easy a way out to relief from our desperate need to work as a distraction. But I will trust the task to you for now. Don't forget to get some yourself and ensure Uzu knows he has first watch for the night. *I did say we were on duty.*"

"Will do ma'am."

Oil lamp in hand she moved toward taken room. Unaware of the panic that caused within. Crossing the threshold she felt eyes on her but missed the black mass in the corner melt under the far bed before she could turn toward where it was.

"...My nerves might actually be shot."

Closing the door she put the lamp down by the wall on a table between beds. Pack picked up off the bed she pulled out one of two chairs and dropped it there for the night.

From under that far bed hidden listener quietly pulled her cloak together and cast another obscuring ward on herself. Likely safe from being spotted she inched forward to observe Satsuki, looking for an opening that would be safe to get out from either possible

exit. Until she stepped out of her boots. Still sensing some kind of eyes upon her she checked that the door was closed then went over to inspect the window. Frame tugged in places to insure it was not able to be opened. Suspicion confirmed she turned back to face the room and finally noticed the bundle on the other bed. Stepping over to pick it up with a raised brow blocking all avenues of escape.

"My meal kit? But I left it back in the... woods."

Turning around now she was seriously confused. Going down to her knees she checked under her bed. Finding nothing she spun around and leaned further down against the bed to check beneath it. Staring straight through the fiercely blushing woman just millimeters away holding her breath unseen with a growing sense of unease. Until a knock came at the door surprising them both.

"Ma'am, Uzu is back and in a bit a stupor. I'll be taking first watch with him while reading. Sorry for the interruption."

She got up, sighed, and thanked the man for his notice. Sitting on the edge of her bed to study the bundle again.

"How did this get here..."

When she moved to tuck the items back into her pack the other woman found her opening. Back as smoke her cloud snuck out under the door while Satsuki snuffed out the lamp and laid down to think.

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She rushed forward to dodge the pink haired one heading for another bedroom and came to a stop under a table to drop out of the smoke and finally breath.

Too close, way too fucking close.

But she couldn't rest until she was back outside in the night. Poised to continue she closed her eyes and listened. Racket of people on the main floor tuned out she needed to focus on these soldiers. Where they were. Two were resting, one standing outside the door, but a fourth was moving. Ready to go she waited for the door to open.

Tense seconds passed until it finally cracked. Swinging inward one with green hair stumbled in and toward the third bedroom. Her world went gray as she carefully pushed off and went around the man. Taking just two steps in he stopped though and drew his sword to slur a shout.

"Have at yous!"

Instinctively she ducked forward under the blade as it slashed into a candle holder sending it crashing to the floor.

Fucking what!?

It was impossible. But sure enough his steel weapon sailed through where she had been harmlessly, it would have taken her arm otherwise. She couldn't be heard, her body and everything on it untouchable outside existence. All except the energy displaced in her wake.

He must have felt the shift in *air* temperature almost a meter away.

She didn't expect the light field that blinded her on the other side of the doorway and tore her thoughts from the swordsman. Pain racked her body caused by a nullification field that fought to rip the magic out from every cell in her body to stop it from moving.

Blinded with pain she made a mistake, she screamed.

Air let loose from her lungs created a noise unheard by the Imperial squad, resounding through the black and white world instead. Floating there she curled up and clawed at her throat that wouldn't draw in any air. She was choking in the vacuum of the void. The only real hard limitation to how long she could stay there.

She had about a minute before she passed out and eventually died forever lost to the material plane. With no guaranteed way to cast her way back she reached into her cloak to pull out an emergency escape plan. Grasping the frail green crystal she hoped it worked and crushed the prepared emerald in her hand which caused the world to fracture. Four person squad mustered to readiness once again stared at the nothing Uzu had swung at were forced to shield their eyes from the bright green explosion in the hall that sounded like a chandelier had fallen.

Stumbling forward Uzu coughed from the white smoke cloud that spread from the blast. Hand waved in a feeble attempt to clear some of it he found and moved past Houka to catch a glimpse of a black form shuddering from it's own gasps and continued his attack.

"There you are!"

Firm grip on his sword he swung down with the shout. His target heard his weapon and rolled aside quickly into the cover of smoke.

"From the fount of life, release, force!"

"Wha--"

When a bright red light flashed after the strange words he didn't have time to even blink before a solid thump hit him square in the chest, emptied his lungs, and flung him like a toy back into the suite with a trail of smoke. Landing *through* the solid wood table he hit the floor with a groan. Unable to get up with the room spinning in all his senses. Voice recognized Satsuki ran forward to stop Houka from attacking as well.

"Stand down!"

Confused he obeyed but followed her deeper into the rising cloud as it dispersed, and nearly dropped his staff.

"Mi-... Mil-... M-Milady--"

"Are you alright!?"

"Ow... Let go!"

She tried to help pick the woman up but the black cloaked figure threw her off before she could get up to her feet. Fixing cloak she glared at them.

"You cared so much you came to deliver it in the middle of the night?"

"S-Shut up."

"I was going back tomorrow you didn't need to trouble yourself with this."

"I was... just in neighborhood. Bye- **oor not!**"

Trying to turn and walk away she spotted a man come up some stairs down the hall. With haste she turned to smoke and moved back directly past both people standing in the way to duck behind the doorway. Both of them feeling frozen down to their bones from the rush of air through their clothes. Inn-keeper crossed his arms and stared at the scene.

"Just what is going on up here!?"

Composing herself she coughed into her fist to turn his attention away from where Nonon was trying to disarm Uzu before he hurt himself in the remnants of furniture.

"One of my troops has gone and gotten himself into a state that I will beat him for. I'm terribly sorry about the damages we will pay for them. *Right Sanageyama?*"

"Iziss... what?"

Satsuki promised that he would be punished and told Nonon to throw his purse over. Snatching the bag off his belt with a smirk she juggled it away from his awkward grabs and tossed it to the doorway.

"Hey!"

"You fucked up Monkey pay the price. Heads up ma'am!"

While Houka stood dumbfounded at what he just experienced Satsuki caught the bag and pulled out a few silvers. Coins handed over to cover the damage and then some she told the man that there shouldn't be any more disturbances and wished him a pleasant evening. Frozen in place Houka pushed back into the room with a shove she closed the door. While Uzu finally got to his feet to put Nonon in a headlock she frantically tried to free herself from Satsuki scanned the room. Stopping on the dark corner to her right no longer lit up.

"I know you're there somewhere."

Her knights collectively remembered that they were dealing with an intruder and looked toward the shadow. Trio surprised when a person actually walked out of it frowning. Two somewhat recognized the cloak, one stumbled forward in amazement.

"If you don't back off we're gonna have a problem."

He tried to study every square inch of her as deeply as possible, not believing what he was seeing tonight collectively. Lady Satsuki hadn't exaggerated in her descriptions. Flapping his mouth open and closed he couldn't settle on any of the millions of questions to ask first.

"You keep staring and I'll eyes rem-, *remove your eyes*, fish mouth."

Pushed aside Satsuki ordered him to tend to Uzu's condition and motioned their guest over to the surviving circle of couches on a rug.

"You're already here, we might as well talk about why."

With just a quick glance around there was a number of gaps she could slip through. But the guy with the staff and glasses currently using his stone to *barbarically* mend small bruising spots in the green guy's back would just use another Null field and start the mess all over again. *That* somehow annoyed her more than the fact a regular human actually felt her pass at range. Black material pulled close she went over to the offered seating much to Satsuki's relief.

She held her questions as the witch poked and prodded chairs until shrugging her shoulders and sat down on a sofa with knees crossed. Hunching forward to stare down at her toes, arms in her lap. Taking a seat across Satsuki waved away her knights to drag Uzu to his bed so they could talk privately.

"I will thank you for returning my silverware, but I have a strong suspicion you didn't come here just for that. Nor do I believe you frequently visit this establishment given your reaction to the owner and our previous discussion. I would ask if you've reconsidered my offer but that's getting ahead of myself. We should start with proper introductions. You remember my name, yes?"

Given a clear opportunity to attack while she was on the floor, Satsuki hadn't. Maybe that conversation wasn't all lies. Someone who actually didn't want her dead for once. So she cleared her throat.

"Ryuko... I know some magic. Live in my woods. Nothing else to say."

"I was honest with you please be honest with me. You just used multiple *rather unique* spells without a stone in sight. There's more to you. Even from your appearance that much is obvious."

"*Just* Ryuko... Okay, yeah I know some more useful things than you'll find in a usual library. *What of it?*"

"You're an elf, aren't you?"

That earned her a rise in Ryuko's face to look her in the eyes. And a snort.

"... *What. Of. It.*"

"Nothing directly, I have no ill feelings toward your kind. But the knowledge you have of your people is invaluable. The ruins we are exploring are tied to them. It's full of Sylv carvings and what we're fairly sure are Elven skeletons."

"Elves don't build tombs. Bodies get burned and spread to the wind to return the magic used in their life back to nature. Or *something... **Mysticism bullshit.***"

"We do know that much. Which is what makes the site so unusual. As far as I know it's a one of a kind discovery. You must have gone through quite a lot to learn what you know and the effort likely included experimentation or study of the arcane arts to learn or recreate certain spells. Are you not interested in the study of magic, particularly of the Elves? You have no idea, we *have no*

idea, what you could learn there."

She didn't answer, but looked away without arguing the point. Or actually answering about her heritage.

"I'm offering to *pay you handsomely* to do what you want to do. What's the problem and how can I solve it?"

"...Why?"

"Because we need an expert and you're the only--"

"No. *Why?*"

Looking up again Ryuko had a test for the *history lover*. A game she hadn't played in years because *Sir Oinken* always cheated.

"You're not doing this because you're interested in old spells. Human's can't use the good ones, it'll shatter any stone you can carry."

"You don't believe this is an academic pursuit?"

"You said you were a ruler not an archaeologist. I ***don't.***"

The switch hadn't been a surprise. It was bound to happen given the subject matter. Satsuki braced her head on her hand to prepare for what would be one of the most important verbal bouts of her life. She had to use what little she knew, and straight up guess the rest.

"I beg... to differ."

She smiled when she got an eyebrow to raise on the face across. The faintest trace of a mischievous expression coming as the woman uncrossed her legs and hunched forward. Arms spread on the couch to either side. With Uzu down for the night Houka and Nonon silently took seats to watch what was going on. Man taking notes as fast as his fingers would let him write.

"Oh really? Miss didn't know much and wanted to talk in common thinks she can keep up with proper conversation?"

"Yes really."

"Where did you learn?"

"Library."

"This ain't shit you can just find in the reference section."

"Family well off. Good stock."

"Bullshit, the only legitimate ones left were handwritten by apprentices against their masters orders. Those caught were burned to death along with anything they wrote. Everything left had to be plucked from where they were hidden."

"Well off... means... well off... um..."

Biting her lip she was stretching anything she could think of to describe the old tomes held by the Royal library written by scholars during *The Brush Crusade*. Before the authors were killed for heresy anyway. She had no idea how to say that though. Minutes passed with her eyes closed searching. Ryuko's canine displaying toothy grin growing slowly at the same time. Left with a pause too long for recollection she conceded, ducked her head, and asked.

"Royal?"

Clapping her hands together Ryuko jumped up to stare down at her with mirth and a smug smile. Putting one hand on her hip and poking Satsuki in the chest with the other when she looked up.

"Ha! Yoe- rah- nah- val- eyy. **Royal.** You *fake*."

"I'm not a fake I just didn't know how to say royal library in the capital. Human written books made trying to decipher Elven... prisoner transcripts. Only two books in full Sylvan are there and both have been beyond anyone's ability to even partially comprehend."

"Which means you lost!"

As suddenly as her merriment began it abruptly ended. Processing the flatly delivered statement. Turning to face Satsuki again she grabbed the woman's shoulders and stared at her seriously.

"What. What do you mean *books*?"

Outwardly she remained stoic. Inwardly she was *ecstatic*. Finally *something she wanted*. And of all things it was directly tied to the greater mission at hand. She had no idea how they were going to get their hands on them, but no matter what they would undoubtedly be safer in *Ryuko's* ownership rather than in her own mother's. For now anyway.

"In the central library of the Imperial capital overseen by the Royal family, that I am a part of, and the High Court of mages two tomes reside under lock and key. One is completely unknown, the other based on guesses of diagrams is some kind of celestial book. Pictures of the stars and heavenly bodies in the four seasons. Technically it is under my authority to transfer them to you."

She searched Satsuki for a hint of a lie. A joke. She had only

five of them, and they had been the only five her father could confirm left existing during his study in life. Collectively her source of indispensable casts and knowledge of the world's inner workings beyond the visible. One of them was the only reason she herself was even alive. While her father's ability to decipher magic and the old tongue itself was *distinctly amateur* at best, especially compared to enchanting, he had diligently attempted to figure out one in particular since he was young and from that knew the basics of what to do when everything surrounding her birth transpired.

Releasing Satsuki everyone looked on in interest when she stuck a hand deep in her cloak and it returned holding a large red book. It's leather binding rippled with age, pages edged in worn gold. Bracing the heavy tome on one arm she cracked it open. Carefully flipping fabric pages that showed its age Nonon had to hold Houka down to stop him vaulting over the seat in front of him to take the book from Ryuko. Particular page required found she turned the book around to show Satsuki and pointed at an incredibly detailed graphic of four different night skies surrounded in thousands of words in small print the woman couldn't understand.

"Does have it-, *it have*, this? These exact depictions. Like this."

"*This is...* I *think* so? It's been a while since I've seen it personally... What... What does all of this say?"

"...It's not Elf."

"What? Then, *what is it?*"

Book snapped shut she held it to her chest and put a hand on her forehead. Recalling old words that had been told many times to her in the crib until it was ingrained deep in memory. An ancient lullaby actually on the previous page but she translated as best she could in common. Voice and red light of her hair enrapturing her audience.

"*Oh by the trees, by the breeze, by the churn of the seas. Child poor sweet child of Gaia born in the eves of these. Forever marked, life blood sparked, most at ease within these you shall be. Proud gold of the life rich sun, Bright bronze of the summer fields, Royal red of the trees falling to slumber, and Purest white of dead winter's frozen kiss. Go with the wind, go to the glades, for there is your home child. There is buried the blades of your prior execution. To frolic and fight bitterly among the souls of thine kind. Scene of the war unending fought in the era before time. To recharge and retread the steps of thine soul's mind. Oh poor poor sweet child, you must grow strong, don't dally long, you must resist the world that will do you wrong...*"

Repeating the words in the original tongue she stared upward. Swirl of small white lights gathering around her to dance at her beckoning call. Reaching forward they moved with unseen wind to gather in her palm. Room's temperature falling well below what the summer night should bring sending chills through the audience watching magic itself grow thick and collect turbulently. Roused from his sleep Uzu joined the three stunned stares from the door frame he leaned against.

Opening her eyes warmth flowed back into the air and the concentrations of magic left unabsorbed to dissipate she clutched her book with both arms. Staring down at Satsuki she answered the question from the group's earlier private conversation.

"I need it... *I want them.* On top of whatever you offered Kiryuin, the two books from the first era. *Then, I'll do it."*

Shaking off her daze and letting faint blush die down Satsuki stood up and put out a hand. Hesitantly taken by soft fingers she smiled.

"That's a pretty high price to pay Ryuko, the court won't just let me grab and walk out with them in my bag. Even if I technically own them."

"That's your problem Eyebrows. When do we go get them?"

"Not tonight. Best to get on the road in the morning to start the journey back. If you want we have spare beds so you don't have to trek all the way back to your clearing. Unless you have things to pack for an extended journey."

In the not so far off central square the church's bells started to ring halting the conversation. Ryuko's ears picking up the clatter of hundreds of boots and weapons around them besides the sound that hit her down to the soul.

Congregation in danger.

Chapter End Notes

And we start to get deeper glimpses into the inhuman mind of the last party member joining for a while. Gamagori Ira will rise into his own eventually worry naught, just not now.

I also did say grim dark was coming for the record. How dark remains to be seen.

The Order

Chapter Summary

“By the wisdom of our last living elders there is only one path to surviving the relentless onslaught of the Aou-rah obsessed blind-weavers. It is my deepest regret to inform the Forum that as the solstice is upon us we will use it to turn to the old blood and beg forgiveness of our ancestors for what we are about to do in this hour of hopeless desperation-... Electors please remain calm! We have made this decision as our brothers and sisters are slaughtered with a zeal unseen! It is our hope that we will be judged as cruel survivors who fought the insane by our descendants, and not found as corpses who became the last generation after tainting nature by returning The Inheritors to existence... Truly this might be the end of days... I'm sorry. I am so very sorry...”

- Chief of the Emergency War Council, General Gláros, Year 7102 Second Era.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Underfoot the season's first snow brought its comforting chill which bled through her leather shoes with every step. For reasons still beyond her the feeling was far from unpleasant. If she took off her socks and slippers it would be even more so but then her steps wouldn't crunch so loudly in the air, and she liked the noise. It pushed away her nervousness in the surrounding low whistles of wind.

Friend and loyal protector from unknown threats that needed to be vanquished hugged close she needed to borrow his *infinite bravery* and *unflappable focus*. The morning wake up call was only two hours away and she needed to be back or Nanna would be upset. Today the monthly traders from the south were leaving for the season.

She wanted to watch them leave up close for once, but Papa had strictly forbidden it.

She wanted to see them though.

So she ducked out her window and down the usual tree. Careful movements to ensure nothing would snag on the frozen garden plants, and to avoid the staff that were normally only ever friendly to her but would be cross and upset at her flight. Free of the grounds she sat in a quiet spot and put her shoes back on to keep socks dry. Nanna would know if she came back with them

wet. From there she just took the right pristine paths through white fluff toward the harbor.

It was an escape from the order of days set in stone for her to follow from sun up to sun down while at home and not the cabin. And she usually hated that order with a passion. Its restricting routines binding her to boring lessons on stuffy decorum and regular educational instruction she was supposed to know.

But Nanna was always quick to gently remind her that life had order for a reason every time she tried to stop and do something more interesting. Always helped her through the day structured so everything she *had* to do would get done in a timely fashion. Then she could do what she wanted, within certain limits.

Right now though she had nothing to do but sleep, and how could she sleep when the pretty ships she only got to see from afar were sailing away?

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Leaving the woods filled with dark pines and wooden skeletons that towered above she pulled her wool hat down securely so it would stay on her head while sneaking through smelly alleys and back streets. Correct district reached she peaked out from behind a crate that smelled like deep sea fish. Hidden ears twitching when wind shook iron signs rusted from the salty air. Street clear of life she clutched her compatriot and ran forward, ducking under bare tables and empty net racks until she could see the water and beamed.

Still floating out in the bay among the hundreds of smaller vessels were the great wooden galleons of the trade mission to the south. The Empire. Their pretty sides full of carvings draped over in places by banners and bunting that contrasted wildly with the simple fishing boats and ships that normally lived in the bay. Their large rectangular gold flags hoisted high above the rigging to flutter like golden mercury in the wind. They all looked ready to set sail silhouetted against a backdrop of stone that formed the natural wall which protected the bay from the sea's occasional anger.

Behind a barrel she crouched down to hide. It was close enough to have a great view and also allowed her to watch the mass of other people who had come to see the traders off down the docks to her right without them seeing her in return.

It also gave her a view of something nobody else noticed.

Down at the end of the pier in front of her another young girl was

sitting to dangle her feet out over the crashing water's spray. Bubbly individual rocked from side to side while she waved at the sailors readying to leave with both hands. Until a heavy gust of wind blew up from the south through the city. Cruel air whipped down streets slowly filling with morning bustle before it got funneled into the bay and pushed brunette off her perch on the pier directly into the freezing harbor below.

When the girl started to scream, only one pair of ears picked up the gurgled words over the crash of waves.

"I CAN'T SWIM!"

Frantically looking around no one else had noticed. There were no adults she could tell. In her scanning of the scene she saw that down to the dock's left the beach hadn't frozen over yet for the winter. With no other obvious options and mind made up she set Sir Oinken down hidden behind the barrel before breaking cover to run forward.

Movement finally noticed the crowd yelled out for her to stop as she approached the end of the wood planks, they only started to move when she jumped.

Propelled by strong lithe muscles on lightweight bones she sailed over the brown head that thrashed against salt water to land hard. Sinking under the freezing water that pulled at her clothes as they saturated, but she didn't panic. She fought the weight and started to kick like Uncle taught her in the lake when she got to stay at the cabin while Papa was busy in the mid winter weeks.

The effort was significantly harder than swimming in the still body of water that danced with pretty light in the nights but she persevered. By all rights she couldn't give up, honor bound she shouldn't.

...When someone needs help, and you can offer, you should try your best Ryu. You're so very gifted and I'm sure you will use that talent to help others in great ways someday. Help make the world a better place one effort at a time as will be your duty like your father now. Maybe you could even mend the old wounds between peoples if they got to know you. Trust yourself to know what to do when the time comes Ryu, always...

Finally breaching the surface to get her head above water she took in a lungful of air before a wave crashed over her. Determined to succeed she powered forward to reach the other girl from underneath the swells. When she got an arm up under a shoulder and struggled to get them both above the surface the girl panicked more at being grabbed.

"Waaah!!!"

"Calm down!"

Brown eyes opened startled at the voice and the girl stopped fighting, stunned. The wool cap had been taken by the sea and ripped from her black and red hair. Left her ears exposed. She didn't care though. With the other girl in her grasp she turned and aimed for the beach. It took her a few minutes to drag them both against the currents and waves that rolled over them and into water that helped drag them to shore.

While sandy rocks were successfully reached the girl wasn't moving at all by then, not even shivering as her skin tinged red from frostbite. Worried Ryuko put her head down and while a faint heartbeat was still to be found breathing had stopped completely. When she pushed down on the girl's chest water dribbled from her mouth.

She couldn't breath because she was full of water.

If she couldn't breath the girl would... *Break. Stop functioning. End.*

*She would **Sehzhios**, die.*

Ignoring the sharp spark of pain in her mind she looked around for anything or anyone who could return the girl to full working order. all she spotted was a shard of glass, and her hand. A plan formed but it was risky. It would work in theory but she'd never done it before to such an extent. Especially not *in* a person. With no time to come up with another idea she reached over and grabbed the green shard, carefully grasped it, and sliced across her palm.

The cut filled with salt stung worse than anything she'd ever physically felt. She couldn't just sit and cry about it though, she needed to be strong or this girl wouldn't live long. Squeezing hand into a fist for a few seconds blood dripped out. Holding the girls mouth open she squeezed out more until the pool inside was dark red. Saturation hastily considered sufficient she put one hand over the other and put them on the girl's chest.

"F-Flow forth from the fount of life. Power of the beyond coil and roll into my purpose!"

As practiced with certain thoughts and the initialization a red rune of light blinked into existence under her hands. A temporary channeling construct her father made her practice over and over to protect her heart and targets from possible uncontrollable accidents. It made her smile already though. If it was working she could control the blood. She could do this! Body before her rolled on the ground as blood flowed down through the water that filled lungs. Red liquid obeying simple commands followed where she moved

her hands instead of being burned up as catalyst immediately.

And murmurs flowed through the crowd that gathered a few meters away rooted in place watching in horror.

Somewhat sure that enough water was now suspended in the blood mix Ryuko moved her hands over the girl's mouth. Flow willed along a flood poured out. Clear liquid separating to splash on the rocks and short brown hair by her knees, red liquid going straight up for the red light in her hands to gather in a ball. When the girl sputtered and took a first deep breath on the ground she smiled in relief. Using the blood to heal her hand before wiping dried flaky remnants away. Then she helped the girl sit up and cough out the last of the water.

"Are you- A-Are you okay? Do you feel any burning in your trachea, larynx, or lungs? Heart rate steady and pulse within normal rates? Anything feel off at all? Anything feel... *explody*?"

"I'm... I'm f-fine. J-Just Cold... But... A-Aren't you-"

Her shivers were strong but they stopped with a gasp when a rock beamed Ryuko in the back of the head and blasted her vision for a moment. Confused with tears in her eyes and a ringing in her ears she spun around and got to watch another rock streak toward her head and graze off a temple in another hit breaking skin. Crumpling in a daze of pain as blood dripped down past her view and onto the rocks.

"W-What?"

Knocked down to her hands and knees by the various rocks being thrown the crowd started to close in while she covered her head. Arms beneath soaked coat and sweater going sore from welts and bruising.

"No stone? She's a witch!"

"The knife-ear's using fucking blood magic on her!"

"Get the hell away from her witch!"

"Wait guys that elf's got the hair of the-"

"Aura above that's why she's never seen!"

"Call the priests! Call the guard!"

"Save the girl from the witch before it curses her or something!"

Before they could grab her she struggled up and sprinted to get away. Crying as more rocks hurled at her back forced her to stumble with each successful hit. Each one followed by an audible cheer. Under fire she still managed to reach the barrel and snatched up her pig. Worry of being seen forgotten she ran right through the streets with blood clotting in her hair. Rushed past confused individuals ahead of the mob that was spreading like

fire.

Halfway home the church's bells started to ring in a way she had never heard before. It was a frantic melody that would haunt her nightmares for years. Her head was throbbing, ears ringing, and town criers were yelling out to angry crowds.

A heretic was among the people. That a call to arms to restore order to the parish was underway that was quickly becoming a sea of armed angry people. And torches.

At the time she didn't know what a heretic was.

Didn't know why everyone was trying to hurt her.

Didn't know what she had done.

All she could do was cry out herself while dodging suspicious hands that grabbed for her and Oinken. Face hot and wet from saltwater, blood, and tears.

"N-Nanna! Papa! **NANNA!!!**"

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The sound of commotion somewhere on the floor below was a distinct change from the last few minutes. Same damned bells toiling away while Satsuki's muffled voice ordered her troops to be packed and ready to move *yesterday*. Woman's hand shook her shoulder to bring her attention back. But stopped when she noticed bleary eyes staring beyond the horizon. The look of a soldier who just went through the worst hell imaginable.

"We have to get ready to- *What's wrong?*"

Ryuko just frowned while forcing feelings back down before any of them spiraled out of control. Logically working through events the bells couldn't be about her. She would have heard the yelling downstairs had it been someone running to alert the town that she was here. Yet a growing commotion in the streets barely audible over the stupid metal noisemaker was not giving her much reassurance. Stashing book away before anything could happen to it regardless she snuffed out all the candles in the sitting area with a wave of her hand. Only answering after she carefully moved to study the world outside a window from behind its frame.

"**Noth**... *Nothing*. What are you doing?"

"Going out there to find out what's happening."

Incredulous Ryuko looked back over at Satsuki. Bright eyes wide seemingly looking through her casting a faint blue glow upon her cheeks under the cover of her hood.

"Why would you do that?"

"We need to know the situation so we might be ready to respond to it no matter what it is. I have an idea already, but hope it's wrong. Come on."

Attempting to grab a hand Ryuko slipped through her fingers and started backing away into a corner of the room.

"Ryuko if my suspicion is correct you are going to be in a lot of danger in particular. We can make you a disguise at the very least to throw off suspicion of who you are."

"I have what I have and that's all I need."

"Not if you want to step out there and potentially get picked out as *the local terror that goes bump in the night* instead of just one of my soldiers."

"Let's get something straight Kiryuin, I don't *belong* to *anyone*. If some assholes are here to rob the place it's *not* my problem. If you're vacating the building then I'm just gonna get a view up high and wait until you wanna leave. Worry about your own problems."

"And how will you do that exactly?"

"That's my business--"

"I've hired you to do a job. I need to be sure you make it through this along with the rest of us intact to *do that job*. If your method is fool proof than by all means tell me, if not we need to equip you in something bearing the proper marks of my command. *Anything, really.*"

She was going to argue but stopped herself to dig a frantic hand into storage. Swearing under her breath when she remembered she had no more emergency escape crystals. She had used the first of the pair to test if they worked years ago. Even under normal conditions the move through the void was, *while mundane*, still technically risky. Especially if her mind betrayed her while traversing... **The Mirror**. Which meant she had to minimize her time there for now, which meant she would be moving around the hard way.

Damn it. Need to make some more later. Kept putting it off too many times.

There was another way to survive the space, but that wasn't something to be done lightly either. The armor was the best she could make, but it was still not even a fraction as good as the real set. It was rather taxing on her resource reserves to use and it was currently difficult to restock with the lack of suitable animals around to drain. It would work in a pinch though. And if confronted by violent people the resupply issue would work itself out rather quickly. Turning to try and just leave Satsuki stepped over to block her. Look in the woman's eyes giving her pause.

Worry?

Faced with two options out only one had an almost guaranteed chance of ending in a fight with *somebody*. The alternative was whatever Kiryuin was plotting. With a sigh she crossed her arms and looked back expectantly.

"Fine. We'll try your way... Now what?"

"Now we make you look like another scout. An... *unorthodox* auxiliary for an Imperial unit but one nonetheless. So I must first ask what's your shoe size."

"...*What?*"

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Eventually Satsuki and Nonon sorted out their *excessively finicky* new member in anything she begrudgingly agreed to put on from their combined available clothing. Long white rain cloak layered on top of her black one and kept well closed all the way around by a gold imperial clasp and chain, borrowed leather gloves and boots meant for horse riding to hide her *too delicate for a soldier* hands and feet from being spotted. Packed and ready for the road they shared simple name only introductions and left the suite in formation, bodies used to physically block line of sight to Ryuko from certain angles in a loose square around her.

Moving downstairs they received some odd stares from those observant enough to remember how many of them had walked in. Everyone else huddled around any windows facing out toward the street to watch figures on horseback rush by. Unfortunately one particularly well built man who smelled of farm fields even from a distance got up and blocked their path to the door. His empty mug waved around at them pointing out their number while words slurred from a face red from ale.

"Listen 'ere Imperials... I may not be book learnin good... but I

can count good enough... Four of ya showed up, now five of ya are leavin right now without a word! How the fuck many are yous... Is this your fault!?"

A pair of his less confrontational friends got up to try and pull him away but he shoved them off and then threw his mug past Satsuki and Uzu at the front of the procession, both unable to catch it in time. In a twirl of white and black material though Ryuko plucked the thing out of mid air before it could hit her with a dark gloved hand up to her elbow, spun around, and tossed it just hard enough to land intact on a coat rack to their right. Which earned her a rousing cheer from the line of men still finishing their mugs at the bar and a look of disbelief from the instigator. Pushing him aside with the sheath of her sword Satsuki got to the door and motioned her squad out into the night's burgeoning chaos quickly.

"A scouting unit must always have an extra pair of eyes to watch them as they watch others. We will forgive the transgression on account of drink but any more would be difficult to overlook at present. I bid you good night."

Outside the answer to the cause of the commotion came in the form of runners carrying various supplies towards the edge of town. Following the road south in search of answers things started to come together as they approached the main entrance of sorts. The local guards were hunkered down behind makeshift cover surveying dark fields further out. A noticeable line of orange wicks in the distance. Small streaks of orange coming from the line to pepper buildings all around them in a staccato of solid burning rain. While most were put out by soft summer wind the few that didn't were attacked by men wielding buckets. Dry straw roofs of the outer farm houses around them set alight forcing the people inside into a frenzy to help put them out in short order.

Among the watchers they spotted the large man from earlier in the day. Satsuki broke from their position behind one corner and ran across the road to get behind the same wall as him. White hooded follower just walking behind her without fear or worry confusing those who turned back to look at the form move. Shoulder tapped the man pulled back and faced Satsuki.

"Ah, good evening Miss Imperial. I'd offer to congratulate you still breathing if you went on that little investigation into the woods, but we're looking to be in a bit of a spot right now."

"Ferdston. What's going on?"

"Jin's boy was on watch and spotted a wall of fire start up over there in the distance. Arrows came down in minutes hitting him in the shoulder. We're lucky he made it to the barracks and got some more men up instead of becoming target practice. And the bells means Father's up. Good. People shouldn't die in there sleep at

least."

"You don't seem to be worried about death at the moment."

"Worrying won't help right now. We're going to need to put a stop to them *or else*."

"Any idea who *they* are?"

"Don't know yet, don't really care. All I know for sure is that anyone trying to kill us isn't worth getting to know... Speaking of worry who's your friend that *I don't know*? Cause either their nerves are stone or they're crazy."

Turning in place Satsuki quickly pulled Ryuko out of the road to whisper with her.

"Are you *trying* to get shot!?"

"You said follow. Nothing can touch me **Kiryuin**."

Leaning into Ryuko's hood Satsuki stared her down with a hard glare at an uncomfortably close distance. Unexpected disarming blush stopping a harsh hiss before it could roll off her tongue. Unneeded rogue urge to lean forward the extra inch to indulge in the pursed lips right there free for the taking forced aside.

This was becoming a consistent pattern she *really* didn't need to contemplate right now. Ignoring it, and the intermingling breaths that brushed her face, she pressed for a clarification in a volume below what anyone else could hear.

"What was that last bit?"

"Are you for real right now? *Yah- zhi- yoe- nah- say- zhi- zas. Kiryuin*. How do you *not* know *that*!?"

"...*Language lessons* later. At least *try* to blend in."

"**Whatever**."

Turning back to the large man she repeated most of what she said in the Inn which satisfied his curiosity at the *extra individual*. Sagely nodding at least taken as such.

"You Imperials wouldn't happen to have an army or something also hiding up in the trees?"

"Not presently no."

"Shame. A legion would've been handy about now."

Careful what you wish for... "Quite. You think your guard can stop

them?"

"Even if only every individual light over there is a person with a weapon we might slow them down at best. We've fought off bandits plenty before sure. But only raids made of twenty at most over the years. This? Nothing this size. We're trapped and they probably know it."

"What about the north road?"

"Even if *miracle of miracles in His name* and we evaded the witch along the way going into the mountains without proper preparation is suicide... Hang on something's moving out there. Everybody on yer toes someone's coming!"

The sound of arrows hitting things stopped as a small grouping of flames started to grow in size. Three figures on horseback now visible approached down the road toward them with torches in hand. And cleared up who was behind the assault. Against the warning of those around her Satsuki stepped out from cover with a scowl and hand on her sword. Hooded form confused still following on her heels.

Standing at the edge of the cobblestones they watched three riders come up to a few meters away. Figure at the head in a long black coat gleaming with golden seals on its front. Her wide brimmed matching hat bore a gold band with a four pointed white star outlined in deep red upon it. *The mark of the Inquisition*. Moving away from the honor guard of fully armored paladins the blonde woman finally stopped her horse's trot and sneered down at them.

"Oh my what do we have here? Why, good evening our esteemed *Princess of Steel*! Fancy meeting you in this rotten backward corner of civilization at such an hour. Shouldn't children be in bed by now?"

"High Inquisitor Harime. You finally got kicked out of the capital by my mother and run out of rats to torture in your spare time?"

The blonde's smile fell along with any mock respect in her words. Confused murmurs at the mention of *Inquisitor* and *princess* circulating among the group of grizzled men meters back at the barricades.

"Why are you here Nui. And just to clarify who is the army behind you? Surely I would have been informed of a field movement of the *first legion* past my own territory."

"Only the finest of the boys here on business! Here's a better question for you *little Satsy*, just what are you doing here?"

"Research into the land and its people--"

"Oh no you don't, don't you lie to me you cold little bitch! *Why are you here!?*"

"Excuse me?"

"I know you're up to something *frowny-brows*. I can *feel it...* And I'm not alone! You've been a *sneaky little spoiled brat* resenting her highness your whole life. Resenting her personal care! There's no way out of here. We're going to purge this little hole of apostates, you, and your friends then burn this place to ash so I can carve whatever it is you're doing out of your bones!"

"You will stand down and apologize to my feet!"

"You think you can order *The Inquisition* around?"

"By my mother's decree you bow to the royal family. So yes, by the authority invested in me as a representative of the state stand down and bend your knee!"

She just laughed at the solid order shouted up at her.

"Listen here *little girl* you've finally slipped up and made a terrible mistake coming out here. Your *authority* only goes to the border and I only listen to the rightful justice incarnate sitting on the throne *by His holy decree of course!* Goodbye, *princess Satsuki*. I look forward to having the boys capture you alive so you can *entertain them*. Some meaty blessed cocks up your ass should loosen those lips up for interrogation *very nicely!*"

Done with Satsuki for now she turned to leave but stopped when her eyes crossed over the silent hooded form just behind the furious glare attempting to burn holes in her face. Likely female individual was vaguely uniformed but not dressed in a way any of Satsuki's regular *menagerie of followers* did. *Ever*. This person was an unknown. *That* was incredibly interesting and suspicious. She must be taken for interrogation as well.

"You, in the hood. It's disrespectful to look at your better while hiding your face!"

Stepping forward annoyed Ryuko ignored a hushed warning and rose her hand. Some of those spoken by this woman and Satsuki had been familiar, even though she had never heard them before. *Too familiar*.

Red circle formed in front of her palm at the call of her mind and words. Nui couldn't even think to dodge the bolt of red energy that flashed from it and smashed into the various magical protective fields imbued into the layers on her chest with a crash of sparks.

The next thing she knew the horses were panicking and she was

almost bucked off into the dirt. The paladins with her equally surprised threw their torches into the dry grain fields earlier than planned in a rush to get hands on their swords. Getting her steed under control Nui immediately ordered them to follow her retreat.

That had been magic. *Hand cast magic.*

She hadn't been injured. But even with her layers of protective enchantments that should be enough to disperse *anything* directed toward her, she still *felt* that. She didn't see the equally stunned face of the caster surprised that the bolt hadn't outright blown a hole through its target. Instead galloped back to her gathered army of the most loyal troops at her disposal in the distance. Mind racing at the possibilities.

It was just a hidden stone. It was just a trick from Satauki's four-eyed nosy annoyance. It *couldn't* be anything more. It *couldn't possibly* be anything more. The Order had ensured that much with significant effort and utmost devotion. Any and all Elven magic users had been assuredly wiped out generations ago.

But if it was?

Still riding at speed she pulled out a trinket and unlocked it. Forcing a gloved thumb inside the golden thing a ring of white gemstones lit up around its edge. The signal was active, *Inquisitor in need of backup.*

Regardless of *what* Satsuki was actually doing there was no way she could survive the full weight of the Inquisitorial legion. Even *with* whatever the hell that was. Even if she had to mobilize every armored paladin and monk with a butter knife to do it the princess plotting possible rebellion needed to die before she could lay a finger on the Empress. Nothing would stop her holy ascension *no matter what!*

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Fields of grain catching almost immediately started to burn before them in a wide reaching inferno that was only stopped from completely encircling the place by irrigation ditches. Standing there the two women were troubled for different reasons. Ryuko's summing up to a simple ***How did that not rip her stupid head off? A human with defense wards?*** Satsuki's were far more reaching in scope. *This* was not in her plans. Ragyo would never want her dead in such a time or place. The throne's psychotic hand was acting on its own alongside an unknown number of zealots to an unprecedented scale. Stepping up next to her other side Houka brought the end of his staff down. His own thoughts split between

trying to decipher the strange red casting and the fairly problematic tactical situation they were now in.

"Recalculating estimates. Odds now below two percent chance of success. Not good, not good. Nui."

"Unfortunately."

"With an unknown number of the Church's proverbial finest, and is burning the fields to prepare for a mass charge."

"Looks like it from here."

"Want's us dead under mass extermination protocols."

"Options?"

"I'm going to be blunt. Besides pray for a miracle--"

They both turned to face Ferdston when he moved up next to them in the road. Hand on his chin in frantic thought that made his deep voice shake.

"Are you by any chance..."

"Princess Satsuki Kiryuin, Lady of Honnouji. These are my knights. Yes."

"She was?"

"High inquisitor Nui Harime."

"T-That was familiar... The magic?"

"A rushed and *unfortunately useless against an inquisitor's gear* shot from a prepared piece of her equipment when a weapon is too slow to draw."

To her relief Ryuko remained silent and Ferdston bought the answer before he turned his attention out toward a majority of the season's harvest going up in smoke.

"A-Aura... An Inquisitor... *Mercy, the Inquisition!?* Why! What have we done!?"

"If I could tell you how that woman's sick mind worked my life would be significantly easier. If not you it would have been some other unfortunate people undeserving of their *attention*."

"We don't stand a bloody chance against them!"

"Calm yourself and keep a level head as before, I'd start getting people ready if I were you. Houka, we need options. I'm not seeing

much."

"Besides the obvious *run*?"

"You know me better than that. Not that we realistically could anyway."

Plodding forward Ryuko went up the road to retrieve Harime's lost hat to study it while the knights gathered around Satsuki. Houka's mind piecing together anything he could think of on the spot. One thought in particular from earlier in the day making him stare at the *not quite Elven* woman squatting in the road covered in cloaks.

"We can move as many civilians as possible away from the front here and dig in for the assault at the very least. If we had the time I would suggest trenches to slow them down. We'll need traps. Or... You know, they do say *she* killed a dragon. We don't have adequate manpower, room to maneuver, or the element of surprise. If there was ever a time to call upon a potential *one woman army* this would be it."

Satsuki looked around and saw men shift on their feet talking among themselves as well. These people had answered the call to action not knowing what they were up against. They were supposed to be the most *enthusiastic* among the defense here and they were second guessing themselves already. Turning around she also studied the form sitting in the road lit by orange bonfires and turning over the black hat to no doubt study with her mesmerizing eyes.

She didn't see the wince caused by a field of painful static in Ryuko's head after thumbing dust off the remotely familiar star symbol. Or the rest of the effects of her *curse*.

Desperate times. Desperate measures. It's never going to be easy is it?

Yelling out she got Ferdston's attention again and waved him over.

"What?"

"Is there a hill anywhere near us? Something overlooking the fields or town as a whole."

"One west before the treeline, why?"

"I want to get a better view of the situation. Sanageyama!"

"Ma'am!"

"Start helping organize any available fighters with this man, Inumuta get anyone in charge who would know the land well together to draw up possible maneuvers that can be employed at present,

Jakuzure anyone with a bow on the rooftops and ready to return fire ASAP. Oh and Houka I'm going to need a light."

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Ball of mage light contained within a glass lantern in hand Satsuki stepped through grass toward the hill she was told of. Unnervingly silent woman mechanically following still just studying the hat in her hands with a blank expression. Coming to a stop next to a singular large tree she looked out at the view. Able to scan the majority of town and the fields with just a turn of the head it was indeed a perfect vantage point to plan defense lines from. And far enough away to ensure none of the locals would hear them talk. After some minutes of silence Ryuko put the hat away in her cloak and spoke.

"There a reason for us to be out here **Kiryuin**?"

"I needed to speak with you away from the people's ears. Do you know what's happening?"

"Vaguely. Some pyromaniac **assholes** want everyone dead?"

"Close but the situation is worse then that. Harime is with the Inquisition. And she likely wants *me* dead in particular or in chains. Any variation of *helpless* would do I imagine."

"Why? What the hell is an *Inquisition*?"

"Seriously?"

"It's not like I keep track of what the fuck is going on *abroad* Eyebrows... **I have an idea though.**"

"It's the militant branch of The High Order. The church. They live to *purge nonbelievers* and anything else deemed heretical."

She expected some choked noise of recognition. A comment on something given her emotional reaction to everything else thus far. An attempt to run off at the very least. She didn't expect Ryuko to double over laughing in her beautifully melodic voice that broke occasionally from the strain of unused motions on her lungs. If the situation weren't so grim she would have been content to just let the the sound continue.

"You find this... *funny*?"

"These bastards have been trying to burn me at the stake for a years. Their own bullshit church comes to kill them all with fire

when I'm leaving? This is fucking *hilarious!*"

"People are dying and you *laugh*? You hate them *that* much?"

"*People* hate *me*."

"Not all of them."

"And how do you know that everyone doesn't-"

"Because I don't."

That stopped her. Pulling fabric closed around her she stared out toward the sky.

"You're not from here Kiryuin."

"Neither are you."

They let an extended uneasy pause sit between them. One unsure what to say, the other patiently waiting for a response. From on high they watched men and women rush to fortify the town. People desperately trying to save their lives and livelihoods as the rain of arrows started again ahead of the impending invasion. White lamp flickering as its limited power was spent. Satsuki had tremendous patience when called for, but with valuable time ticking away she broke the pause herself.

"It's true though isn't it? There are good people out there that don't care who you are. Humans. They don't hate your... you. Those you've known before included perhaps?"

"...They're not here."

"Then why did you come here?"

"I didn't exactly have a choice in the matter."

"Everyone has a choice."

She spun around to glare at Satsuki. Eyes a pair of bright blue disks lit with her emotion.

"Yeah, and people use those choices to *fuck me over* no matter where it is or what I do... No more tiptoeing around. I know what you're doing. You want me to do something about *this* don't you?"

"Any aid that can be rendered to save these people would be appreciated-"

"Then you can fuck off! They don't deserve it. *No one does...*"

"Then you believe these people deserve to *die*? All of them. Burn

and suffer under the hands of violent cruelty while you stand by and deny them aid? *Every* man, woman, and child regardless of what they have or have not done? They can't flee, don't stand a chance in large scale combat, and face *mass execution*. Do you condemn them all to die as judge, jury, and executioner?"

A lone shriek higher than the others before carried with the wind. They both turned at the noise and spotted a commotion in the streets. A procession that moved deeper into the houses followed by a yelling girl. Satsuki recognized it as the waitress, yelling out "*Papa! Papa!!*" in more frantic calls as time went on until one final shriek rolled. And then there was a telling silence.

To her right she could see the other woman tense up. Something in that struck close to home in her. It would be wrong to use such a thing to pressure her into acting, but their options currently didn't leave much room for anything else.

"I don't know what you've suffered through. But you can help stop *them* from suffering now. You've to my knowledge pieced together as an outsider never openly *initiated* conflict with them. Houka spoke with the priest and not even he gave a single account of you ravaging the town. Only unsubstantiated rumors of *curses*. I would posit this as evidence that you don't feel they are all worthy of an untimely demise, for if you truly did you could have easily wiped the whole settlement out yourself according to the rumors of your combat prowess that circulate the region as a whole. An invincible black knight, a warrior possessing unsurpassed power and fury. Such traits though would also prove invaluable in an endeavor to save this town... I'm going down there to fight, to help those who need it, what about you?"

"...I don't help people Kiryuin... ***Not anymore.***"

"Yet you promised to help me?"

"That's... different... You're paying me."

"I'm sure they would be grateful toward a lifesaver. Many might drop some of their anger and fear toward you as a form of exchange if nothing else in repayment."

"***As if...*** Why are you so damn *persistent* on this? It's not like you have any reason to care about the fucks."

"It's my responsibility to care. I took a vow, and up to my dying breath it will be upheld. So long as I am able if there are people suffering I will find a way to help... As the heir to the throne it will be my duty to protect those of my kingdom. If I turn my back on *these people* now there is nothing to say I won't turn my back on those who entrust the power of governance to the crown I will be given. And if I do that it might as well be torn from my

head, melted, and sold to pay for the coronation of a better person than I. With the given field of options before me I am left with a need of *your help* to help them. I need you."

She looked over and caught Ryuko openly staring at her. Woman quickly turned away with a blush when noticed. Satsuki watched her look out into the fields deep in thought after that for a while. Still hearing the cries of people losing loved ones to volleys of invisible black daggers that sailed through the night. Conflict playing out in the twitches of her face. Until finally the woman groaned out a response she didn't catch.

"Duty to the people... Responsibility to my land... The last of it... Talking like Nanna did."

Turning back Ryuko hesitantly met the gaze. But no matter how deeply she searched it there was no trace of hidden agenda behind the face. Nothing but the genuine concerned look that came with an eyebrow quirking up in the white light of the lamp. Satsuki spoke carefully. She acted properly even in the face of outright belittlement. She was a genuine article of a rare breed of person Ryuko hadn't known in a *long* time. *What she was supposed to be.*

And it made something deep in her chest tighten up.

Tearing eyes away she really had fallen farther than she thought possible. From those thoughts her wounded pride surfaced. She resolved herself to respond in kind. As she had been taught. As she might have known long before. As she *should*. With a deep breath she straightened her posture for once that creaked her spine upright. Like Nanna said she should always be doing to keep her head high. To speak clearly so as to always be understood with her voice meant to be heard.

Moving purposefully she undid the golden clasps on the white cloak and pulled it off. Item returned to its place in Satsuki's pack along with the belt, boots, and gloves of her *disguise* with some hesitation on the part of the other woman on where this was going. Next she reached up into the black hood to undo a pair of leather knots that held it in place, grabbed the sides, and pulled it down off her head. After rubbing the sore spots on her long ears reaching up and out noticeably past the top of her hair she ran fingers through her wild locks of black and glowing red to spread them out for the first time in a while with a sigh. Closing her eyes she let the wind flow over her head before speaking with genuine effort.

"Fucking fine... For the record I am *not* doing this for *them*. They are all fools misled by the authority they have been indoctrinated by for generations. They would sooner stab me in the back than repay a favor to my person regardless of merit in the act... *Fool me once...* Alright Kiryuin... Here I am. What is it you actually require or expect from a so termed *insane living relic* that by all

counts should have remained dead in the annals of history?"

Met with silence she glanced over and caught Satsuki's own wide stare hastily redirected. She was surprised at, but rapidly welcoming, the shift in Ryuko's vocal expression to a refined voice with sufficient pauses to ensure correct enunciation. Her even tone contrasting with wild ethereal appearance was also rather annoyingly distracting. Heated thoughts of taking hold of those graceful cheeks in a fit of passion to stare deep into those eyes until she could be lost within them forced away yet again tonight.

What is wrong with me today!? We're both... I... I can't seriously be... To her?... I don't have time for this. "Just... I do apologize but this is not something I am completely familiar with. Half-blood Elf **Fae**?"

"I would be *exceptionally* surprised if you or anyone else were. Something like that... Yes, I am a Fae. But not quite a *High-born* if you want what... we called ourselves... *I think*? From what I know this flesh only took a fraction of what that would bring. This blood was born of Elves, the *Low-born*, likely as the closest vessel for my... *soul*?... The proper classification term you seek is Nymph. *Elven Nymph*. Anything else I could tell you is conjecture from what little there is written and my own possibly *delirious* observation. It gets *complicated* alright?"

"I can only imagine and even then it's probably not even close to the reality is it?"

"That *entirely* depends on how good your *imagination* is... We do have things to do right now though don't we?"

"Indeed full discussion will have to wait for a different time unfortunately. We presently stand against an army that has never lost a battle to turn away, and we only have *less than professional* troops in any number to do it with. I am sorry, genuinely, for needing to push you to war but anything you can do would help."

"If it's war you're looking to stir up you might not find a better person anywhere or at any time... I can fight, but just so we are clear if I hit them they are going to die. In numbers. Anyone you know in that gathering out there that you would care about if they ceased functioning?"

An odd way of putting it. "Know, yes. Care for? *Absolutely not.* Some in particular if there was adequate time I would ask you to go so far as to leave alone so I could *personally* put them down. But that would be a nonsensical waste of effort for no tangible gain. So I won't."

"No pulling punches then."

"Pulling punches? You would seriously not bring your all to a battlefield?"

"My *all* would likely wipe the town and everyone in it out of existence. I have not tested the upper limits at my disposal for certain things... And to be fair *there is no need to drop a millstone to kill a spider.*"

"Just be sure to be as effective as you can. I don't want you dying out there when we still have work to do beyond tonight."

"They won't kill me I have... *precautions for that.* Can't promise to stop all of them though. Sheer numbers make tying up troops a futile exercise eventually."

"Even stopping one would be one less for the lines to deal with. Thank you. Is there anything you will need?"

"I carry everything *I need* at all times. When does the attack start?"

"Our guess is when the fields are done burning giving them a clear path to march through."

"Could take a while. *Midnight?*"

"Solid an estimate as any. I need to go back to the center of town to help organize the defense. Should I take your removal of items as a sign you're waiting here?"

"No, the assholes will undoubtedly go crazy on you like whenever *I'm* brought up. And if they kill you that makes securing what I'm owed significantly more difficult. I'll just... *follow you... I guess.*"

Her chest tightened again when a warm smile was aimed at her with a sincere "*Thank you, such protection will be unnecessary but I don't mind the company. How they react to you though remains to be seen...*"

This was starting to get annoying, if her heart was breaking down from overuse *already* then *she was doomed* no matter what happened. It might be prudent to reign in her usage of magic in the field to smaller casts just in case. She kept this all to herself as they started walking back. Worry gnawing away at her after the lamp went out and she casually replaced the simple mage light with a snap of her fingers and barely a thought, Kiryuin giving her another soft word of thanks and smile preceding another bout of that internal tightness.

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Allowed past a hastily constructed checkpoint they were completely ignored as they made it into town. People were too busy to study the duo moving toward the main square filled with anyone capable of using a weapon. And a stream of people moving in and out of the church, bells now silent, with the injured. Small pile of corpses already next to the building. Spotted by Houka he came up to Satsuki and tried not to gawk at the woman nervously looking around with her hood down.

"Lady Satsuki! The central church has a decent basement along with a large crypt, it's been decided that any non-combatants be gathered inside. Then we can concentrate any wards the priest and myself can sustain to protect the building with. As to direct forces we have roughly eighty men willing and able to fight at our disposal, *although realistically about two thirds of them will actually be capable of much in my opinion*. Nonon has already taken anyone with a bow up to the bell tower with every arrow anyone could find and Uzu is organizing those on ground level. He says we could hold two or three major roads. Current debate is on whether we should employ the use of dropped houses into the street to try and direct which way the Inquisition can attack from. It would also lock in where our forces could counter attack from though."

"Don't damage the town without significant consent just yet. Where is command?"

"Just inside the church. If I may be so bold as to ask a question on the state of a *uh certain individual* ma'am?"

"Ryuko has agreed to help via *offense*."

Scribbling that down on a hurried note he followed them toward the church. Ryuko's unease growing as they approached the building slowing her steps until a steady hand circled her shoulder and helped nudge her along. Passing through the great metal doors people moving about *stopped*. Further into the space past another set of doors pews that faced a quartz altar were full of people praying for protection. To the left in a small wing of the building the injured were being attended to. To the right a circle of old men had been arguing over a map laid out on a table.

Joining the circle the a hushed silence hung in the air. Open stares all around the building aimed at them. Specifically at Ryuko. The stillness was broken by a pointed finger of the oldest at the table.

"I-Imperial... You... An *Elf*? I-It's- *IT'S HER!*"

"Father Orion if you would please remain calm--"

"I'll be calm when I'm dead! Word spread after you disappeared and now we know why, *Princess Kiryuin herself*? And you brought the *she-devil here!*? Into the town, the house of Aura itself! Are you *mad!*? SHE'LL KILL US ALL!"

With a roll of her eyes Ryuko tapped Satsuki's arm and responded herself.

"Would you just shut up for once? You have *actual* problems to worry about from your own **fucking** church asshole. I'm here to *help you, you undeserving fucks.*"

"*Calm down Ryuko...* Yes I am who you have heard. This is Ryuko, your so called witch. Introductions out of the way do you know what's coming then? Who's trying to slaughter your congregation?"

To his credit the old priest bowed his head and placed his hands on the table instead of yelling more. Visibly distraught from the multitude of events happening all at once.

"*Lord on high preserve us it has come down to this...* In all my years I never imagined the weight of The Order would fall on us all. These are good people who have done nothing! They must be here for *You, witch-*"

"No. Harime is likely here because *I'm* here, to some degree I must apologize for drawing her attention. *My people* found your letter, not the remnants of the Order. The Inquisition only answers to the throne now and Harime is the worst of the lot."

"The Order wants to kill... *the heir*? W-Why have you brought this madness upon us!?"

"I didn't. *She* is. I'd rather this all have gone as quietly as possible, but that is firmly out of my hands now."

"*Quietly*? Why did you come here? What have you done!?"

"That's a private matter-"

"My neighbors, *my flock*, are *dying* and I'm standing in front of a heretic in the middle of the Lord's house Princess!"

"I needed her in my employ for specific reasons and she's agreed to the terms. She will be out of your hair as soon as we leave after helping you now. Right Ryuko?"

"You're making me think this was a bad idea Kiryuin."

"*Bear with me and try not to antagonize them.*"

"*That is entirely on them.*"

"...T-The witch has a name?"

"Oh big shocker there! Like any of you ever bothered to ask."

"Your vile ways struck us first!"

"As if. I will remove your lungs if you keep talking bullshit asshole."

This could not be allowed to escalate. Before any kind of fight could break out Satsuki unhooked her sheathed sword and slammed the metal end cap onto the stone floor. The sound echoed throughout the building and out into the square to get everyone's attention effectively enough.

"Yes, her name is Ryuko. And she is person. She's sharp as a tack, is remarkably pleasant *and refined* company beneath some rough edges, and she *will* leave you alone if you leave *her* alone. Now, collect your wits and hold your tongues because we have work to do *together* if you want to have any chance at saving your town! She's agreed to selflessly help you in your hour of desperate need even after all the resentment that has fomented between you. I won't ask you to change your perceptions of her in an instant but if you are looking for some *all powerful reinforcements* in a miracle you got *one*. And only one. None of us can expect any more so put aside your blind hatred *or fear* and focus on the job at hand! We will be using all available volunteer forces on the defense of the town and the church, Ryuko has promised to take on the enemy across from our battle lines directly. Any man that thinks they will fair better without her help is welcome to walk out of this town *right now* and fight alone where they will undoubtedly die alone! Well, *ANYONE AMONG YOU!?*"

Turning in place she studied each and every face visible. Their eyes all blinking away to escape her commanding scrutiny. When the town clock up above in the tower struck eleven the square was still silent. Not a soul moved from where they stood. Not one word of protest uttered. Nervous glances were thrown by neighbors toward friends, business partners to spouses, all looking to see if anyone else would object. Catching a glance of Ryuko herself the woman was staring at her feet with a glowing blush all the way up to the tips of her ears from the unexpected glowing praise of her character. Satsuki broke the silence satisfied.

"No one? Good. For everyone who's stayed we will do everything in our combined power to save this town. Now someone get some runners in here and spread the word, do *NOT* fire upon or otherwise attack the witch, Ryuko! Any who do will be considered a traitor on the spot against the town, your fellow man, and my forces directly as a member of my Imperial command from this point henceforth!"

Turning back to the map while her orders were put to motion in a flurry of activity Satsuki put her hands on the table and gave it a good once over. Flat land and no real fortified positions anywhere to defend from. And no idea what Ryuko was going to do.

At least with Nui openly wishing to kill her she knew just how the psychopath genuinely felt. It would be prudent to put her down for good if possible with such a chance at open conflict.

If only it were so easy.

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At midnight the town clock struck another muffled chime. Bringing with it a wind that swept through Ironwood from the north that made men stationed at temporary walls shiver. From the unseasonable cold or their nerves they couldn't say for sure. Inside the church and its catacombs hundreds prayed and cried. All hoping to see the morning sun tomorrow. In the tower Nonon and various archers waited. Houka and the priest working on shielding the building from a rain of expected fire nearby. From there she could see a pair of figures out near the edge of town standing on a roof. One the probable source of the cold air surrounded in tiny lights flickering in the distance.

Just ahead of the main frontal defense line comprised of the best fighters available a small building with a mostly solid roof at the very edge of town was being used as an observation platform. Satsuki stood there waiting when the wind blew through her hair from behind. Far in the distance the fires had been gathering into shapes, *assault formations*. But the woman beside her with cloak billowing out toward the field was not studying the enemy as well. Smokey edges of black material around her were releasing tiny white lights with each flap in the breeze. Fingers leafing through a heavy gray tome, as old if not older than the previously spotted one, muttering to herself in Sylv while scanning the pages. But she was there as promised.

Book snapped shut and returned to wherever it was she kept them her eyes finally switched to scanning the distance.

"This is seriously everyone you could find to fight *that*?"

"A small sleepy town in the mountains is typically not burgeoning with professionals trained and ready to fight wars at a moments notice. Let alone simple foot soldiers to conscript in numbers. It is what it is, so we will make do."

Behind them up the road various individuals comprised the actual line itself. Shields of questionable origin and spears of differing lengths occasionally shaking. Many among them were not sure just what was more terrifying to look at in front of them as a whole.

"How many are out there you think?"

"Conservative estimates range from three to four hundred. The Inquisition as a whole has around a hundred paladins, three dozen inquisitors, a handful of High inquisitors, and roughly three thousand troops to call upon. As of now we don't know for sure how many of that number could potentially be behind the visible lines. That's also not taking into account their ability to impress other regular legions into service *In Aura's name* to bring as many troops as they think they could require though."

"...Because of course they can. **Fucking clock worshipers.**"

"We shouldn't be dealing with anything near their full strength if that puts you at ease. Logically this is a small town and Nui likely knows it would be a waste to mobilize thousands of troops to kill dozens of armed militia. Especially if she's doing this without orders from her *master*. Besides, the inquisition has not fielded anywhere near its full strength anywhere since the... *Crusades.*"

She noticed the wince on Ryuko's face and hastily apologized for mentioning anything of the sort. But her words were waved off before the hand was used to rub temples throbbing with pain. Her headaches were returning. *This* was getting annoying as well.

"Just go do whatever you are going to do **Kiryuin**. And don't die on me."

"I shall say the same to you of course. Good luck... Or I suppose it would be better to say...**Wind guide your fate to good fortunes**, I think?"

She turned her head at Satsuki with something of a disbelieving look. Brows raised far up into her hair.

"Was I right?"

"...Technically not *wrong.*"

"Close enough."

Focusing back on her task with steady breaths she felt out for the unseen currents. The power of life that flowed all around and through everything. Particularly the large swirls she was calling forth toward her from around. She was going to need a lot of it to

avoid burning up her reserves too quickly. This was going to be much more than repelling ragtag invaders.

This was a return to war.

Racked by another static spike into her mind she was getting seriously annoyed by the inconvenient timing of their return. They had started when she was five. Left her alone for a while after coming to the woods. A force bleeding into the fringes of her consciousness at seemingly random. Imprinting sounds and images into so called *flesh memory* in wickedly painful lances. The Books said they were her *soul returning her memories*. The Elves called it *the madness of the Inheritors*. The curse of Fae blood. A *Fae soul*.

Regardless of the truth this resurgence triggered by something was significantly stronger than most anything she'd felt recently and it forced her to pause in her gathering. Forced her to experience the lucid waking dream that overtook her senses of a so called *past mortal life*.

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Deep among the static and warped thoughts her vision was always cloudy. The sounds heard muddled among a bottomless well of shouts and pain. The only definite sensations were metal bindings suspending her upright in a blindingly white room lacking distinguishable features until a hidden door opened. Two near identically uniformed individuals then entered carrying items. Their faces too far up to see.

"Damn it's only been four days and already in mostly one piece?"

"I keep telling you the power of the Inheritors was crazy man. Crazier then they are already. This one is among the especially resilient though. There's a reason the techs spent so much effort on finding them. Hold her still, I'll unhook the fuel line."

Stuck staring at the floor with a limp neck she wore only the barest necessity in clothes she couldn't name but somehow knew every detail of intimately. Her focus dragged more to the small number of hoses shoved through her skin constantly warm from the substance pumped through the loop installed in her abdomen. Then a pair of gloved hands that held her ankles so she couldn't kick.

With the aid of a large knife one of the two intruders carved her gut open to pull the blood covered tubes out and let them fall in sashes still attached at both ends to the ceiling. Her dry throat only able to give a hissing growl of protest into a gag locked on

her face as she struggled against the pain.

"Damn it hold her! And you shut up. You're pumped with so much power it'll be over in a second. Look, it's already sealing up."

All she could make out beyond tears was the bright white burn of light as her body worked the unseen fabric of power to re-knit flesh. Left hanging she was next doused in water by a hose to wash the mess away into drains hidden in the base of the walls.

"Orders came down from command Thirty-seven. You're going right back to the front today."

"Wait we're taking her from the tank to the field without re-orientation?"

"Desperate times man, it's either we lose people to the clock-worshippers or send in these poor bastards."

"This ain't right man, this just ain't right..."

"None of it is. But keep it to yourself before someone hears that and they put you in the penal battalion for treason corporal. We have a job to do and lives to save. These things can't die so long as we have fuel and if we lose yet another of the ancient collector arrays we're all going to the front to get killed instead. Now help me undo the locks so we can get her to the depot for gear up. She needs to be on a bird in two hours."

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Those able to watch the scene swallowed more nervous feelings as the formations deep across burnt fields started to advance. All eyes moved to Ryuko and what she would do in response. Some concerned as she swayed on her feet, mind not quite there for a minute. Her eyes flew open when Satsuki grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her. Another concerned look bringing another tightening in her chest. Brushing the hand off she let the dull throb in her skull go away before fully shaking herself awake.

She recognized the scene playing out deep in the field. But she had never seen it. Not with her eyes.

Ignoring the sense of familiarity she pulled her small red half scissor out of her chest wrapping. With mental command it unfolded to match the general size of a longsword she stabbed point down into the roof in front of her and started an incantation with her hands on top of its *hilt*. Smoke rolling off her cloak that chilled

the air even further while eyes and hair glowed brightly in the night.

"Armor of the Winter Court feast on life and anchor to bone, protect thy champion."

Forced to back away from a swirl of cold black wind that engulfed her Satsuki looked on to spot red lights emerge from within. Form visible when it cleared.

It looked more like a jeweler's work than a blacksmith's. It shone like it was mostly made from perfectly cut obsidian or deep black glass. Adorned with glowing red lines and a general faint red glow all over the design was *excessively* ornamental at best, outright *ridiculous* at worst. She stood on red *high heeled sabatons* that formed the basis of tight fitted armored black greaves up to her knees. Further up her legs matching cuisses over black leather followed the shiny angular design up to a pair of red glowing straps that connected them to her waist. Hips protected by a *much too low and short* fauld constructed of heavy leather pleating just long enough to cover her rear from behind yet open to the front, each outer rectangular section capped at the bottom with a small silver spike. From there the only thing running up her back from red waist band was another red glowing strap that disappeared under a matching dark red cape that covered her shoulder armor and billowed with the wind. Two more red straps around her front connecting to two angular silver caps at the ends of more black leather not so much containing as sitting on *indeed shapely* breasts leaving almost the entirety from her waist to upper chest completely exposed.

Her hands were encased in delicate plate gauntlets black on top and red on the palm. Forearms up to her elbows covered by vambraces that matched the grieves and *looked* solid at least. Past them more black leather ran under plating that went up to a pair of small angular pauldrons on her shoulders. From breasts up leather and more metal plates formed a *fairly decent in comparison to her midriff* amount of solid protection for her collar and shoulders still following angled lines all the way up her neck to a full face, *one piece*, helm that came to a point in front under a red glowing *glass filled* slit where her eyes would be. The helmet in particular was adorned with a number of flourishes including most notably a pair of long metal protrusions on either side that resembled her ears.

Even in it's *absurdity* Satsuki had to say that the form lit by glowing red lines from top to bottom followed the wearer's feminine curves *perfectly*. Its parts attached in ways she couldn't see with its complete lack of clasps or locks. Not even rivets. The design was visually impossible to put on or take off traditionally and borderline alien. It was far removed from anything produced by man or anything taken from the elves that now lies in the royal armory.

With just a slight push Ryuko jumped from the roof with sword in hand. Form enshrouded in smoke briefly again she landed riding the back of a black smoke steed and charged. Their enemy was not content to just take a charge however and soon the battle for Ironwood erupted when the enemy's own cavalry maneuvered around from a back line to counter such a push back.

They were expecting something more significant than only one rider though.

They had no idea how much that one rider would do.

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Storming forward down the dusty road her vision was tinted a fraction red but otherwise unobstructed. Far away in the darkness her eyes allowed her to make out individual soldiers unsure of what to make of her behind their metal shields. Just one woman, charging an angry mass of troops who dedicate their lives to hunting people like her and have done so for over a thousand years. While arrows directed at her passed through her smoke steed and pinged off her body's shimmering protective shield harmlessly, she started to think about her present situation.

Why the fuck did I agree to this again?

Still some minutes away from the enemy's own advance group she allowed the mental tangent continue. Going over today's events as a whole that started with the disruption in her glade. To now rushing toward a mounted platoon of golden knights in defense of people who would never do anything close for her. She needed to be ready for horse riders. But as she physically prepared to start fighting her thoughts just went back to *why*.

She was not getting anything directly out of this. She'd tried the *selfless noble bit* before and that ended brutally for everyone she actually cared about as far as she knew. Potentially worse the further back she wished to entertain notions of. All she could really think of was that face looking at her after asking her to do *the right thing*. And that tightness returned in her chest.

She went because Satsuki asked her to.

Out of time to think further on the subject she was just seconds from impact when her vision filled with another wave of static. Scenes of almost identical description to what lay before her path flashed showing her a charge through ice and snow toward men of similar armor. Similar banners.

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While falling through the sky she spotted three similarly, *though not identically*, armored women around her. Each skin bearing suit shimmering with different colors, construction, and lights. Collectively they watched their *dropship* going down past them. Flaming hull suicide crashed at full speed plowing into the advancing enemy line trailing thick black smoke the whole way. Its power assembly detonating to kill at least a dozen or two more of the enemy as the last hurrah of its two crew. In theory they could have bailed out and lived. But in death the four found actual respect for the pilots. They had fought the enemy to their end instead of running. Just as a soldier should.

Ignoring falling debris from it and other such boats being torn up by bolts of energy from below they dodged similar shots aimed at them which pelted the mountainside they landed on in formation. Hitting the ground running their heavy metal boots smashed through the ice and snow beneath them as they turned downward speed into forward momentum toward the enemy.

They didn't actually know why they were fighting. Didn't know the strange people they were fighting. They just followed orders. Suggestions to fight and kill from the **low-born** who had stolen them from their rightful slumber and pointed them at violent targets. Fight as they had done time and time again for as long as any of them could remember.

The current targets were significantly easier to individually put down than each other at least.

Enemy within range all four called forth their ghostly mounts and drew their swords. Tips pointed forward at a line of cavalry rushing to meet them they started the chants. The first volleys of shots to thin the enemy's numbers. At their call bolt after bolt of power created massive explosions which vaporized platoons of enemy combatants before them in an instant. Holes deep into the line created became their entry points into the gore filled confusion where their blades began a whistling song punctuated by severed limbs. Given form in large swaths of blood.

The moves were an elaborate whirling death delivered from a bygone age. Bodies practically immune to the enemy's normal weapons flailed at them desperately in response they could not be stopped. Numb minds uncaring for the splashing red rain and shrieks of terrified death they wrought.

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Fighting against the pain in her skull threatening to rip her consciousness away temporarily she bit her tongue and concentrated on that pain to keep her anchored firmly in reality. Without thinking though she also readjusted her sword grip to match that in the vision, pointed it forward properly, and started to call up spells.

From the fount of life flow into my purpose, force, detonate!

Over her gauntlet a red circle formed and from it red bolts of energy rolled down the blade to gather at a single point where red light sparked, matching the glow of lines on her armor from head to high-heeled toe.

Two seconds to contact the woven magic following mental command released. A full knight charging at her with his lance aimed for her exposed chest didn't have a hope of doing anything more than register that the woman did something before he and his horse were hit by a bolt of magic that started a chain reaction in his blood. Power amplified by the initial charge both bodies exploded in a blast of red light that vaporized him and the mount, tore the riders on either side apart bone by bloody bone, and forced the rest to back off in shock. Letting her jump through the hole she created in their line and charge the marching infantry directly. Black hooves striking them like warhammers as the construct began trampling bodies into the dirt.

When weapons attempted to strike her in return they simply bounced off, wielders carved effortlessly by her magically enhanced blade now fully extended at another mental call and swung from side to side. Horse controlled by her mind she dedicated more of her attention to firing off more spells, five at a time, from the fingers of her left hand. Targets gutted by remotely opened rifts sending organs out of the material plane into the shallow end of the void. She became a whirlwind of violence tearing men armored for war and their horses asunder with ease. Mental static burning within her head melting scraps of scenes of war into her current battle. The harder it burned, the more efficiently she swung. Every eruption of blood fueling her to hit harder, move faster, and lights burned brighter.

As she carved her way through the lines magic eventually started hitting her.

While the individual insignificant bolts of energy and fire hitting her were nothing to worry about letting them all concentrate on her would be foolish. She knew the technical limits of her armor, knew that she didn't have the same near invincibility that *the original* had thanks to inferior base materials and her incomplete knowledge of its construction, but so

long as she didn't let magic weaves amass to shatter her protective shielding she would be fine. So she circled around to plow back through the lines specifically aiming to kill anyone waving a stone around as more troops focused on her. Which was the plan. Of which she moved into the next phase of.

Black barely existent hooves when not crushing flesh and steel were splashing through a field now flooded with blood. Feeling out to the power within it resonated with her call and swirled toward her. She started calling upon another spell while the massive quantity of blood flowed up into her boots to refill her reserves.

From the fount of life flow into my purpose...

She was going to turn the whole circle of carnage into a red locking surface to trap as many of them by their feet as possible in place, then while they stood useless target them with more mass fractures into the void to destroy their bodies. Until another horse rider blindly charged at her. Woman's higher pitched voice screaming out as she passed wielding a dagger. It was the blonde from before.

Ryuko ignored the coat wearing woman as just a nuisance. She didn't expect the short silver blade forced at her to shatter the red disk on her gauntlet, punch through her defense field entirely, punch through her armor, and then slice a deep line clean through her arm in a shower of blue sparks and red blood. Pain flared from where she had been cut clean through shattering her concentration. In an instant her horse dispersed into smoke and she crashed to the ground at speed with the knife embedded in her arm. This was not the worst of her problems though.

When her concentration was broken it also severed her from the magic weave she had been carefully constructing around a large area. Unrestrained and unfinished the spell completed itself. Too much power coursed in lines caused them to shift through the air until one by one they overlapped which created looping failure points that kept drawing in any and all available magic to fuel ever more instability. The lines of its flow became so saturated they were *visible to the naked eye*. The uncontrolled chain reaction burned every ounce of available magic in the air it could until it reached critical mass. Igniting a burst of raw power it detonated in an explosion of red light that set fire to the sky itself to rival the midday sun. In an instant night became a red day and a crack of thunder that resounded for mile after mile became the loudest sound heard by man since The Second Era. Scores of troops around the epicenter were *erased* in a flash, scores upon scores more killed by the shock-wave that erupted dead center of the enemy line. Even more were flung off into the air injured. Screaming for their lives fearing the end of days. For the lucky ones it would be the end of their lives quickly. For the rest it would leave them crippled and dying to hit the ground where only then they were finally released of their pain for good.

Both women caught in the blast as well were sent tumbling through the air propelled through the flying cloud of burning pain, debris, and gore. Only intact by virtue of their magical defenses.

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Even after only two hours of fighting things already looked grim. Ryuko had gone into the eye of the proverbial storm and tied up a sizable number of troops. Probably including the personal ire of an enraged Nui as they had yet to see her since she turned away from the town. However the inquisition had indeed come to Ironwood in force and several divisions had broken off to attack the town itself directly as per their orders to purge all who stood in the way. Faced with the veteran troops of the Inquisition heavy fighting ensued that slowly but surely forced the defenders all the way back into the town square.

Battered, bloodied, and bruised the last ring of survivors stared down the wall of steel and flesh baring marks of the inquisition. Backs almost to the doors of the church itself those few among the defenders who had survived the fight thus far were already at their limit. Four of the two and a half dozen left collapsing from exhaustion or outright succumbing to their wounds even while a stand off was held meters apart. In the distance fire could already be seen burning sections of the town down and casting the stage of their last stand in an ominous orange light. Archers long since out of ammo and things to throw from the tower moving down to ground level to fill in the few gaps in the line they could with backup weapons.

Satsuki and her knights had not escaped injury from the melee, shallow cuts marred their once white uniforms with blood and dirt. Leader's own face cut at a cheek from a spear unexpectedly hurled at her. Uzu's attempts to give the line time to pull back and reform time and time again earned him an unknown number of wounds that he ignored to keep standing his ground even now. Even Houka was hit by a number of stray arrows trying to re-apply an *un-burning* ward to the far end of the roof from the bell tower. They were on their last legs. But she was currently worried about something more pressing an issue overall, what was going on in the field.

As if delivered from the gods her thoughts were given answer in the form of a single blast that forced everyone down when the ground itself trembled. From the south the night sky lit up pure, angry, red. Winds more powerful than any storm shattered every surface of glass around them, anything not nailed down sent flying through the air carried by the impossibly large shock-wave.

Screaming above the gale Satsuki ordered anyone to take cover. They didn't actually hear her, but they scrambled to get as close to the base of the church as possible in their terror and hunkered down waiting for the unprecedented chaos to end. *If* it was going to end.

When it finally let up she looked out across the square and saw the enemy had fared about as well as they had sitting under their raised shields. Too much to hope for that to have whisked them away. That idea quickly found more merit than she had originally thought possible when a soldier's mangled corpse fell from the sky into a clear area and splattered against the ground with a crunch. Looking up collectively at the sky returning to darkness they saw a cloud of debris and dust higher than the mountains themselves falling back to the fields outside of town. Even her own jaw fell at the sheer *scale* of what she was coming to realize was the after effects of a *spell*. A spell from *red light*.

Ryuko had undoubtedly been the source of that *impossibly large* explosion. *That* had been the power of *Old magic*. Fae magic. The legends spoke of destruction and war on a scale unfathomable. Told tales of power beyond comprehension that destroyed the land in ways inconceivable. *They were true*.

And Ragyo was trying to *harness, That*.

Rising to their feet not one person was sure of what they had just witnessed and experienced. Hardened men of age shook like frightened children. No one knew if that was over. If there was going to be another. Nevertheless the trained troops across from them rose to their feet and returned to their formations.

Which was a problem for Satsuki and everyone around her. It was quickly eclipsed by one much more pressing. Her eyes went wide when the probable source of temporary daylight landed between the lines returning to a stand off. *Hard*. The black, red, and flesh tone form crashed into the stone floor with enough force to shatter an impact crater she then bounced out of. Spinning wildly her body landed and came to a stop some ten meters away clutching her red sword. Even from range it was easy to see she was littered with bloody injuries that sizzled as they healed rapidly in red light. Steam poring out of various places on her armor before it dissolved entirely into smoke leaving Ryuko to lie on the ground under the tattered remains of her cloak. Rolling onto her back she lay there bruised all over, but smiled up at the black sky through grit teeth.

"Ryu- *Ryuko!*"

Grunting in pain she shoved her left hand up holding an overly familiar item she had studied on the way down. *Nui's knife*. Its owner landing similarly to how she had in the street near the opposite line. With the help of a knight armored in gold who came

forward from the back of the Inquisition's line half of her hair was filled with blood. Holes and burns sparking in a rainbow of color from failing magical enchantments visible all over what was left of her garb after they had taken the vast majority of the impacts. One of her arms hung limp and broken as she indignantly rose to her feet to scream at Ryuko with none of her usual cutesy manner.

"WHAT THE UNHOLY FUCK DID YOU DO YOU BLOODY BIMBO WITCH!?"

Pulling herself up to unsteady feet Ryuko paused to hack up some blood onto the cobblestone with a frown.

"***That's not good...*** First off that shit was *your* fault for fucking with my casting. Second this was my dad's and I'm taking it back. And *then* third I am going to put your ass deep into a grave you crazy murdering- ***fuck...***"

She was forced to double over and grab her gut with another splatter of blood dripping from her mouth.

"***Come on, can't deal with this yet... pull it together.***"

"You will return that to me this instant so I can stab out every single one of your organs!!"

"Stealing is wrong."

"I took it fair and square over a corpse!"

"Blow it out your ***ass!***"

Knife secured in her storage void *thankfully still accessible* she forced herself back upright properly. And immediately stumbled forward onto the ground. She managed to get back up to her knees at least the second time and stare bitterly at Nui. Ryuko was done. Satsuki had no more ace in the hole to stop the literal hundreds of troops trying to slaughter every last man, woman, and child in Ironwood.

Trying to come up with *anything* they could do she didn't expect the tap on her shoulder. Surprised to find the pastor who excused himself past her, walked past Ryuko, and approached the other line where he fell to his own knees before the remarkably still breathing Nui.

"Inquisitor please hear my plea! This town has been nothing but devout followers of the Lord Aura for as long as it has existed! Why do you come to kill His faithful!?"

Another tall man in full golden plate came forward and hefted his sword onto his shoulder. Taking his helmet off to hold against his

breastplate.

"Who are you lowly man?"

"O-Orion, brother. I am Ironwood's pastor, have been for almost fifty years. These people are loyal to Him! They are loyal to the Lord Aura! Why do you seek their deaths!?"

"Brother Orion, your flock has been charged with aiding a traitor to Empress Ragyo. And harboring... *that... that wretched abomination against mankind!* For these crimes you must be purged."

The pastor was begging for mercy and Satsuki could do nothing as whispers circulated the crowd behind her.

"*They really are here for her aren't they?*"

"*We should just give her to them and live! Her and the witch.*"

"*But what if it's a trap?*"

Things were going from bad to somehow worse.

"B-But brother-paladin we have done nothing but fight to kill that heretic for years! Let the people of Ironwood prove their loyalty--"

Tense seconds passed after the paladin turned to Nui abruptly. Woman seething in rage in turn waved over a circle of similarly dressed like her individuals to whisper among themselves. One uneasily staring over at the defense line in front of a church itself. When a judgment was reached the paladin walked back to Orion and two inquisitors pulled out stones to start trying to save Nui's life.

"Brother Orion, you wish your flock to be spared?"

"Y-Yes! By His name please show the loyal His justice and mercy!"

He walked further past the man. Sword raised he pointed it toward Ryuko meters away and yelled out in a commanding voice.

"Hear me defenders of Ironwood! If you truly fight to uphold the world's order by Aura seize the traitors and help us kill this witch to end her destructive ways!!"

Glancing back Satsuki could see the conflict on the townspeople's faces. They were being offered an out to save their loved ones. *Real or not.* All they had to do was switch sides against foreign people they really didn't know. Sell them out to the Inquisition. Even after they had just fought and bled with side by side. These people didn't deserve to be forced to make such a decision. Didn't deserve any of this.

Nodding her head slowly Satsuki grasped how the situation was

developing and looked to her knights who filtered past the defenders to stand with her. Cracking a kink out of her neck she started walking and they followed. Reaching Ryuko they now faced an encirclement of hostiles on all sides that collectively outnumbered the group of five by at least thirty or forty to one. Holding her black blade in her off hand she reached down to help Ryuko up to her feet by the shoulder. Surprised despite herself at how light the woman really was. Which only combined with her overall frail state to fill Satsuki with a deep guilt she channeled into a tightening hand on her sword. She'd put Ryuko up to all of this, she was now committed to defending this woman to the last.

"I told you Eyebrows... This is what happens when I help people."

"An I told you so I take it?"

She silently nodded against Satsuki's once white uniform in response.

"A good guess then."

Ryuko was faring even worse than they were upon close inspection. Heavily bruised flesh noticeably dripping with sweat. Skin glistening in the dim orange lights that danced above them engulfing the town.

"You don't look to be in a good condition."

"Yeah well, you are not so *pristine* yourself right no-ow...
Fuuuck..."

"Don't suppose you have any ideas?"

"Two. The first would be burn up what's left of my blood reserve in the... *what's left* of the cloak to blow up the town, the valley, possibly the surrounding mountains, and all of us in a blaze of glory that would be told for ages as the last stand of some assholes who made the biggest hole in the ground ever."

"We're trying to avoid dying if possible. I know it doesn't quite look like it *but still*."

"Whelp... Option two it is then. Give me a minute. If I stay conscious that long..."

Reaching into an intact section of dark material she pulled out a silver ring and slipped it on a shaking hand while the troops around them moved to form an actual circle. Including the last few members of the town guard with faces grim and full of their own guilt they swallowed down. Back to back Satsuki and her three knights held their weapons out. Daring the enemy to close in. All four curious when white lights blinked around them while Ryuko

muttered to herself in Sylv. Hands doing something under a red circle in her palm.

When the wall of swords and spears started closing in she coughed out one last mouth of blood and spoke.

"Okay... Everybody... hold on to my hand behind your backs... and literally prepare your assholes, this is could be... *rough*."

"Why?"

"Well Eyebrows... I've threaded more reinforcing lines into the enchantment... so I can overpower the effect without it *instantly* failing... But it was only originally meant for one person as it was... Maybe two... And it's older than all of you combined... So we might not make it in one piece... Take *that* as you will."

"*Probably dying* is still better than *definitely dying*. You heard the woman people."

Still brandishing weapons at the ready they all followed her instruction to take hold of the frail hand behind their collective backs. The paladin now leading the combined forces realizing something was happening ordered everyone to attack immediately. But it was a hair too late.

"*R-Ring of Lynnval, I Recall!*"

Men had to shield their eyes from a bright white light that enveloped the group. When it dispersed only blackened stones and dirt burned from the power were left. The princess, her knights, and the witch of Ironwood vanished without a trace. Leaving the town to its fate at the hands of the Inquisition.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to say outright I am not happy with this chapter. But after fourteen rewrites (the vast majority of which only between the bit from the Inn to the hilltop discussion basically) I've come to the conclusion that I can't make it better. So here we go.

Yes Ryuko just lit up a *tactical blood-nuke* outside a peasant village. And everyone having a *really* bad day. Even Nui and she's technically on the winning side.

Lot of stuff crammed in that amounted to all of around one night that I didn't feel like splitting up. Do tell me if its been fucked up in the process.

Lastly while not plot necessary I decided to have a little fun pulling in different things for names instead of using completely made up stuff. Some might be Easter eggs / spoilers... Or not. Who knows!

Sanctuary

Chapter Summary

“No good deed goes unpunished.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the beginning there was the creation of a great canvas upon which the gods gave birth to the heavens, stars, and cradle earth. In this perfectly constructed place life was free to frolic among wondrous gardens and vistas. All was good. Over time the creations that lived and breathed grew more and more complex. Divine creations made to outdo all others before them in some regard. Eventually one god crossed the final line. From Gaia's hand the first intelligent life capable of fully recognizing the world for what it was, and the self for what they were, came to be.

They were vain perfectly beautiful beings that spent their days as they wished. Did anything they pleased regardless of outcome be it good or ill. They had no care of consequence at all within their minds in that perfect world. They had no rules handed down from above. They were free and unburdened by guilt. They were the *First Ones*. Life completely and utterly unrestricted.

The Fae.

As time went on the other gods frowned at these beings and the destruction wrought by their hands. Unchecked and unchallenged by the world wonders crafted carefully by the gods were soiled in a chaos spread by the Fae. Divine works of art torn asunder through the same divine tools that the Fae themselves originated. They could not be reasoned with, they were unstoppable, and they had nothing but scorn for Order.

They became the first beings of creation to invent on their own, and that invention was wickedness.

Evil.

Having never encountered a situation where one's creation overstepped its bounds and interfered with another the gods knew not how to handle such events as they unfolded. They were powerless to even try intervening directly. This lasted until finally one of the gods rose to challenge the complacent Gaia and

her Fair children, The great Lord Aura himself. The original creator of order, time, and the heavenly magic used to build all creation itself. From above the heavens the light of life came to nurture all that grows, the tides follow the cycle of the moon by his design to evenly distribute the oceans, and through his design the hierarchy of all natural life was evenly spread around the world. It was this hierarchy the Fae spurned with reckless abandon.

Gaia's inability to control the Fae had deeply disturbed his works. His order. So in his first intervention since finishing the blank canvas that was initial creation he split nature's energies into two halves. One of growth and one of death. Flowers would no longer bloom in the snow and trees would no longer lay bare in the great light of summer. All life was affected by this great shift, most importantly including the Fae. By doing this he indirectly fractured them.

Faced with internal division they turned on each other without mercy. In the conflict between these beings the worst corruptions of creation were allowed to continue unchecked. The Fae wove powerful spells to combat the other side and this terrible devastation was defended against by even more powerful spells that then required even more powerful attacks to break.

The other gods were outraged that He had only made the problem worse.

But Aura told them to wait and watch. Patience would be the deliverer of salvation. So they did nothing and waited for the seemingly never ending spiral of greater destruction to run to its natural conclusion. In the field of cataclysmic war they wiped themselves from the face of creation completely.

When the world finally stopped trembling under the might of godless calamity calm was achieved at last. Away from the dark corners left scared after being inhabited by the Fae life rose with new strength like never before. Innumerable kinds of fish, fowl, and beasts finally crawled out from the shadows of destruction and grew to fill creation as the god's had intended.

Gaia wept for her children. They had been in a pain of wickedness that consumed them for so long only to end with total annihilation. She wished to try again. She wished to give her beautiful children another chance at life, but she could not act so freely without thinking as she had before. No gods could. Aura's righteous word was law. For his success in solving the problem of Fae the other gods conceded to his wisdom in all matters involving the world.

She persisted until finally he showed her his compassion. He agreed that if there was balance she could raise her children from the ashes as her final attempt at such complex life. All they had

to do was live in harmony with the rest of creation.

With great joy a new kind of Fair folk was brought to earth by her hand. Children of the woods formed in Gaia's excessively graceful style they were like rare flowers that walked the land once again. These Elves were fragile as they were beautiful like the Fae before them, and still as wickedly cunning to survive like wolves. In this new world order plants grew from Aura's sun, animals grew off eating the plants and other animals, and the Elves lived in the forests off the animals.

This harmony was not to last unfortunately. Eventually the Elves found their roots in direct divine creation and with it the unrestricted magic of the gods to disrupt natural Order.

Once again Gaia's children outgrew the balance.

For the third time Aura intervened when his patience with the Elves came to an end. He decreed it impossible for such complex life to be in balance with creation if brought about off the scales that all other life operated on. So by his own design evolved a natural final solution to this ancient conundrum. A top of the natural order of survival hardened by successful generations of life.

Mankind.

The children of the earth both hardy and numerous, able to weather any storm and slay any beast through grit, determination, and skill. A shepherd to finally manage the wilds born from within them. Under his guidance they too grew and shaped the world, but by their own two hands. Ambitions were tempered by the limitations of flesh and hard work as life had always been envisioned.

This formed the required element to bring balance back. The natural and unnatural peaks of creation's hierarchy standing at odds with one another. Expansion of one checked by the other. Until the conflicts that arose between them grew too much. These skirmishes became wars over centuries and as the years ground on Man's superiority prevailed in hard earned success after success.

As losses mounted the Elves in desperation turned to their wicked roots once again. Unleashing the utter unholy devastation of Fae war spells upon the world once again these *Old Ones* tried to turn the tide of how the order of nature was progressing, but the Lord's will would not be challenged.

The gods demanded an end to the problem, their will would not be stopped.

For the fourth and final time Aura directly intervened to protect natural order and its shepherds. From his divine knowledge he directly granted mankind the channeling stones to wield a fraction

of his magic to a controlled extent. Human tenacity empowered by the tool of divine intervention itself allowed Humanity to once again push back, and they kept pushing. Fighting for justice under Aura man punished the Old Ones for their mistreatment of creation in righteous fire.

With holy armies marching in his name cleansing the world The Elves as a people were burned into dust cast to the wind. Their remnants left scattered to be ordered and purged as Man saw fit when even Gaia abandoned them to maintain the balance of creation once and for all as she had vowed. Never again did divine life rise.

Mankind stands as the protectors of Aura's domain and all that is good. Masters of the elements by his divine design. While conflicts among men rise of Man's free will the destruction is never on a scale that could harm all creation as had plagued the world before. Man's compassionate hearts would not allow them to bring The Lord's domain to such ruin. Burned acres would regrow from the nutrients in ash. Cities of stone and timber were reclaimable by nature to crumble back to the dirt when no longer in use. Iron and steel would bloom rust and be whisked away with the wind when abandoned. And finally no single being possessed with seizing power would be able to touch the gods full power again, In death their bodies would feed new life.

Thus the world turns onward under Aura and the gods.

Or so goes the holy scripture known as the *Acts of Aura* she had to know by heart like every *good little child of Man*. The children of Aura. It was supposed to be an absolute truth of the world. How life itself came to be. The foundation of a Church that would bring humanity to salvation from evil wherever and whenever it should arise.

But something was... *off*, about the whole thing when she studied the world of luxury around her.

The circular walled in *Old District* with its red tile roofs was the last remnants of the original city of *Kinzan*, and the location of the palace. As generations had come and gone the rest of the city beyond white stone walls protecting it had been expanded and re-expanded numerous times. Each generation of construction adding more and more districts until today where it was a city of a million souls. The kingdom beyond now an Empire. Through it all though the magnificent heart remained intact century after century to the present day. It was the East's historical center of human achievement *claiming* roots as far back as Human civilization has stood.

It was those achievements she questioned.

The first of them all was within the halls of the palace; the floors are heated by a great engineering marvel. Water from deep hot springs rising up from the depths is captured in a pipe network that runs beneath all the floors, *and those of the grand mansions of the district as a whole*, to always keep it the same pleasant temperature year round. In the palace's center the water then lets out into an opulent bathhouse of white marble and complicated gold decorations before running into the drains. Collectively the networks were a massive construction touted as a triumph of Man over nature.

Yet the building patterns claimed to be an offshoot of *old plains style* are nowhere to be found anywhere else in the major cities, the Empire, or beyond. Timeliness claiming record of Human civilization also frequently have a number of holes where detailed information that could explain this discrepancy are nowhere to be found. The world as it had been presented to her was cast into doubt. Even the steamy air of the baths itself pushed her suspicions as they held an acrid acidic tinge from sulphur seemingly ominous of past ills from many millennia more than mankind has lived.

Admittedly the last one might simply be an invention of her mind that persists in certain situations instead of the cozy comfort steam normally brings.

By accepting the possibility that man *hadn't* created the city her mind logically led to the next question, *Then who could have built Kinzan?* It was one she could not find a ready answer to. One she quickly learned she was never supposed to even be asking, yet sought out with renewed efforts when all but one of the voices of authority in her life attempted to stamp the inquiry from her mind.

Her father once told her that there was more to the world than she could see with her own two eyes. Told her to always seek out the truth. When she asked why he laughed and told her that *she was getting the idea*. She never got the opportunity to ask him about misgivings with her history lessons. He was assassinated when she was five. Firebombing of the royal carriage by individuals who were then horrifically tortured, executed, and displayed for all to see until the birds were done picking their bones as punishment for treason to the throne.

After that life only got more complicated when her sometimes unstable mother went headlong into violent madness. Ragyo lashed out toward anyone and everyone when presented with failure to any degree, lusted over her like a beast, and would spend long hours into the night delving deep into tome after tome of arcane arts.

She had no idea how this could be resolved, or what her own mother was doing half the time, but even as a child she knew that *something* would have to be done to preserve the kingdom and she was likely going to have to be the one to do it. Things only grew more troubling after receiving the results of her own private investigation into the events of that unfortunate day her father died. All signs pointed to the distinct possibility her own mother was the only person who could have orchestrated that murder. Along with many *many* other deaths in the Empire.

She was forced to grow up fast out of necessity. Someone *sane* had to get a hold of the situation on the ground and keep the Empire running. Bring border regions left to languish for too long in lawlessness back to proper order. Have the power to work against the Court's interests when absolutely necessary. She had to become strong as steel or she would have snapped under the pressure long ago.

Particularly when drips of moisture were landing on her forehead while standing in the baths she went to great lengths to ignore *Ragyo's* hungry eyes upon her nude form. In those moments where she was left bare before the beast lurking in the steam, *and plotting to do gods knows what to her someday*, she focused on putting her mind to work.

She needed to know why the women was obsessed with magic. Why the obsession with any material that could relate to it. Where did that material come from? What was she trying to get out of that material. What forces were working where and to what ends? How could all the deaths beyond typical political backstabbing tie into the situation? Would it lead to more deaths? Did they tie into the situation at all?

Why her father would have been so detrimental to the schemes that someone would have him killed.

When alone she would try to let herself relax from the mountains of stress for at least the length of a bath. But even then while in the Empire's seat of power she would end up staring at the dazzling patterns of gold and crystal in the ceiling above and think. She studied how the clear crystal lengths created an unbroken chain filled with light. Wondered how and why it slowly pulsed like it was breathing at all hours of the day.

Like the gold accents were more than just decoration.

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She woke up with an excessive amount of dull discomfort all over. The most annoying being a slow steady splash of cold drops on her forehead every few seconds. Raising a sore arm up she wiped her face and rolled over to get out of the water's path. Forcing eyes open she found herself on some old wood smooth from wear. Beyond her shadow the space was dimly lit from above. Going through a checklist the first order of business was getting her hands in front of her face to inspect them for damage. Dirty but otherwise intact she looked around to judge what shape her knights sprawled out across the floor were in. Forcing herself up to a sitting position among the group she let her vision stop spinning before calling out to them in a dry voice.

"Status report."

Three voices eventually responded in varying groans while she used her canteen's water to flush the dryness down her throat. Uzu managed to add a "*Kill me now,*" before his head dropped back down to the floor with a solid thump that was bound to make him feel worse. Her next check was to find her weapon, hand going to her belt the familiar feel of Bakuzan's hilt eased her nerves some. Fully awake she could hear drops of water finding their way through the wood around and a muffled rain in the near distance.

Unknown location. Questionable health state. Priority, find Ryuko.

They were in a compact wooden room and their *Fae life saver* was nowhere to be seen among them. Shifting to get up something twinkling on the walls caught her eye. Staring hard at the dark surfaces she found gold patterns were running from floor to ceiling embedded in the wood inlaid in ways that looked Elven in origin. Following lines up she found the light was coming from multiple clear crystal pipes that ran along the upper walls that glowed with a flowing power of unknown origin. Craning her neck to look straight up the ceiling itself was filled with even more of the odd familiar work, and a striking round centerpiece that raised ever more questions about everything around them.

"Houka... Houka have you seen this?"

He rolled out of his fetal position and straightened his glasses to look upward himself at the call. Eyes immediately drawn to the gold and crystals in the cracked ceiling beams that lit up occasionally with slow pulsing light waves like water ripples.

Not receiving any kind of intelligible response from him after his jaw fell open with raspy astonishment Satsuki left him with a pressing need to find the missing member of the squad. Straps and buckles for pack released she got to her feet unburdened and stretched out those sore muscles. Any and all of her possible wounds checked in the process she was satisfied to find her skin intact under now slightly roughed up uniform.

Issue deemed low priority enough she pushed deeper investigation aside for later, ordered her troops to get up, and tested the floor planks. Judged solid enough she made her way toward a door out to a hallway in similar state of mild disrepair. Deep in a wooden structure she was going to start a systematic sweep of the place to find a way out until her foot slid across a small puddle of splattered black liquid. Kneeling down to study it the heavy smell of iron clued her in to it's identity as blood, the probable source of the liquid sending her into a sprint down the hallway.

No, NO!!

Following a spotty trail of dark *ichor* into a stairwell she went up a flight of damaged steps before climbing out a hatch open to the outside world where a light afternoon rain was well underway, and a view that took her breath away halted her in her tracks. Walking over to a side railing the scene was impossible.

At some point in its life the at least fifty meter long broken ship she was standing on had suffered an ill fate leaving its dark cracked remains in a rocky grave surrounded by forested hills as far as the eye could see. Mountains could be seen in the near distance. Far above the sun's rays were bleeding through murky clouds to cast down on to the sea of greenery.

Forcing herself to ignore the obvious question of *how* there was a more pressing issue to resolve. Scanning the deck from where she stood for more of the trail there was no sign of any masts, nor any other means of propulsion at all. Along the length of the thing beneath the wear of the elements were beautiful wood working flourishes of a pleasure ship though, and simple sections of far lesser quality telling of rushed repair jobs. Eventually she just went to a last set of stairs leading further up to a raised deck at the very back of the ship where she hurried once again. Ryuko was on the floor leaning against the railing and looking toward the sky while sitting in a pool of black tinged maroon lit by a sunbeam. The last traces of magic lights around her skin and upraised left hand whisked away with the wind before it fell into her lap. Her voice was strained and back to being gruff. Her right hand limp at her side covered in black flaking char and her own blood.

But, she was still alive. The mission could still be salvaged.

"What are you doing out here!?"

"Dying. Recharging the hard way... **and it's not working. Stupid flesh just can't take the strain, blood won't hold enough power to do anything on the scale I need... Fuck...** Are you assholes finally awake? I get having your insides moved through space can be a little *rough* the first few times, but it was just a simple point to point direct *spatial shift* of all things... **Human**

tenacity my- ow, ass."

Verifying her fears Ryuko's state brought the knot of worry from the town square back to the forefront alongside far more frustration than she would normally allow in her mind. She slowly sat down on the wet deck facing her. Once grand cloak was now nothing more than a tattered leather mass failing to stop the rain from rolling down her cheeks and bangs. Once flawless skin now pale from blood loss and littered with heavy deep purple and orange bruising from the neck down. Right hand in particular under the black flakes being taken by the wind bore a deep dark scar that looked like it had been split to the elbow, burned back together, and was still bleeding profusely in spots. The cloth that once adorned that wrist now nothing more than ruined rags completely soaked and sitting discarded on the deck. Frowning mouth dribbling more of what was evidently Elven blood onto her chest every time she spoke tinging the off-white rags there into dark red tones.

No, no, no... damn it Harime... She has hours, maybe. All this time searching for her... All for bloody nothing? Have we been doomed to fail?

It was a small relief when Ryuko looked down with tired eyes to study her in return. At least her face had been spared the damage that afflicted the rest of her form. Elven teeth bared when she grimaced and grabbed her bleeding wrist.

"Anything- **fuck**... Life threatening I miss?"

"Miss? What do you mean? You don't mean you- On me or-... You healed us?"

"Oh no, I mean in the fucking clouds! Yes you, idiot."

"You did that while in your *current* condition?"

Ryuko turned her head to the side and answered in a low tone.

"Most of you were cut up all over and two were bleeding to death. The fuck was I supposed to do, *sit and watch*?"

Even after everything she's been through, including because of us, she would still see us well? But her own heavy injuries remain?
"Self proclaimed as someone who won't help others, but you still help us after getting *burned* rather heavily?"

"I-...I want what I'm owed! Can't... *Can't get it if your dead*..."

It was possibly the least convincing argument she had ever heard in her life. She had been surrounded by the best liars in the world for most of her life, *but still*. Even while filled with heart sinking dread of immanent failure she almost chuckled at the

lightly sputtered admission, force from her lungs came out of her nose with mirth.

So much for the Fae being the literal embodiment of selfish evil.
"I suppose a sincere thanks for the medical attention is in order either way. Though if I may you look--"

"*I'm not dead yet.* Getting there, but not yet... **ow, shit.**"

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"Could both of you get up? Monkey you were told not to drink so stop bitching, and dog stop obsessing over nothing in your notebook like usual."

Nonon was the first of the three to her feet. Having survived the battle relatively unscathed she figured it was up to her to drag them out into proper lighting to patch them up before Dog could use his staff to actually fix them. Dropping her pack onto Houka's protesting gut while he continued to stare up and scribble away with a pencil she dug out a roll of bandages and knelt down to get Uzu on his back.

"Come on muscle brain where does it- *hurt?*"

"*Everywhere.*"

Picking through the holes in his clothes she frowned. The white cloth was obviously stained in multiple places through multiple layers from beneath from the dozens of piercing wounds he took in that *cluster fuck*, but no matter how vigorously she searched there wasn't a scratch on him. Turning around she kicked her own bag off Houka's chest where he had left it to continue drawing the ceiling in a book she plucked from his fingers and tossed aside carelessly.

"Hey!"

"I'm being serious roll over for a minute you were hit three times in the back of your arm *I saw it happen.*"

"But the ceiling is--"

"Now Dog!"

Forced onto his stomach he retrieved the notebook while his right arm was wrenched up behind his back. Once again the sleeve bore the holes and dried blood, but again not a trace of injury on his skin. Releasing it and letting him get back to his frantic drawing

she looked around in disbelief. Spotting arrows in a pile by the wall a slight black char flaked off from the heads on her hands when she picked them up, but they were otherwise completely usable. Which should have been impossible if they came from *Houka*. They were designed to break off inside the wound after striking their target so they *couldn't* be reused.

"*How in the fuck? Dog, whatever it is you're doing stop and tell me what is going on. Uzu is only hungover, you're completely normal- fine, and I'm losing my mind here.*"

Tossing one into his lap he was going to throw it back but stopped to think. He *had* been injured in retrospect. Finally putting his book away for later he sat up to study the arrow.

"Definitely Imperial standard issue. Oak shaft, iron head *unbroken*? Burned? Not burned the fletching is intact *yet creosote on the surface*? No. This is... Burnt blood? The others?"

"All the same in a pile of the junk. Did you do anything while we were blacked out?"

"No... *I was wounded, now I'm not? Muscle soreness?* I was up after Lady Satsuki and I would assume you two the same. Did she do something?"

"Satsuki didn't get that far in magic tutoring, *too busy with everything else*, she wouldn't know any advanced white magic. Especially not to the extent I'm seeing. It's like nothing even happened."

"*High class casting beyond even master level results... Elven class?* Ryuko!"

"Doubt it, she looked like a fucking wreck last night."

"Nothing else would explain the situation, *unless it's an effect of the teleportation?* Would still be her doing."

"Where did she go by the way?"

"Probably what Lady Satsuki went looking for. Considering what she survived initially and a current lack of corpse I wouldn't worry. Our *master swordsman* could be a different story however."

Managing to sit up Uzu dragged himself over to a wall to lean against it before emptying his canteen into his throat. Mentally going down a checklist from head down while trying to wake up he cracked his neck when he realized he was intact.

"Are you telling me she has a way to fix you good as new without even waking you up *and* she's hotter than a summer tent in the southern regions? *Damn*, can we have like ten of her? I'll take

six... Or give her six if you know what I--"

"Monkey are you for real right now!? You don't even have five you pig."

"Oh come on! You're honestly trying to tell me you wouldn't try a piece of that? Houka back me up here. Even in elf standards she's pretty damn top tier, right?"

"Uzu I would *strongly* suggest you stop whatever fantasy your thinking of letting out of your pants."

"Really guys!? Dude have you never been with an elf? Actually have you ever done it with *anyone*? Wait no, there was that bar in--"

"Uzu first off she's beyond Elf, second she is far far too valuable to quite literally *fuck around with*, and third I would *duck*."

"Huh?"

He howled when Nonon cracked him over the head with her bow after finding it in a corner. Rubbing the fresh bruise on his head exacerbating his hangover he barely caught Satsuki's pack when she threw it into his lap.

"What was that for!?"

"Being a perpetually horny sack of dicks. Get up and stop trying to nut up everything that moves for once you garbage."

"It's not my fault chicks dig war stories, I kick ass, and I dig chicks. Everybody wins! Or is this you saying something?"

"The *fuck* are you *insinuating*?"

"That somebody is getting a ditch itch for the witch. Look I get it! If you want a shot at her I got no problem dueling for the right to first crack--"

"Monkey!!"

"What? It's fair."

"*Listen you*--... You didn't see what she was doing out in those fields. She's not another *home grown bitch from the sticks*, behind that pretty face she's a rampaging *monster*. The explosion going off was just a *finisher* to the gory lit-up hell going on out there that killed at least a company or two."

"So she threw some lightning around? Big deal--"

"She was carving up the hordes of battle hardened Legionnaires

like *fruit salad*! You know, the same assholes that gave you trouble when you were just fighting them a dozen at a time. I'm telling you this for your own good for once because I don't think you'll just get a slap on the face for hitting on her. Don't even *think* about getting in that crazy skirt *Uzu*."

"...*Shit using names*? Don't tell me you actually care."

"Listen idiot I *fucking* warned you. If she stabs you in the dick you're on your own. *If she can find it that is*."

"It's the motion of the ocean not the size of the swell."

"Just get the fuck up or I'm hitting you again. That goes for you as well Dog. What are you even doing?"

"We experienced *teleportation* Nonon, teleportation! Do you have any idea just how fundamentally changing this is to the study of magic!? Instant or near instant travel across distance! This is- I don't have words to describe how important this could be! This thing above us is in line with *many* possible Elven constructions. If it is a device created for the purpose of this magic then it must be studied with the utmost scrutiny! Imagine it, able to move between Honnouji and the capital in hours, minutes, or *seconds even*! The ability to spread ideas and information so fast it- This would change *everything*!"

"Oh *for*- Monkey."

"Way ahead of you."

"What are you two doing- *no*, stop! *You can't take me yet!!*"

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Sighing Satsuki got back to business. Instead of dwelling on the thought of hoisting Harime's head on a pike she set about checking her pockets for anything useful. So long as Ryuko could survive the trip and read the material the mission would be a success. Too many innocents had already died for this whole trip to be in vain. Finding nothing to provide medical service with she took to tearing off strips of her outermost tunic and held out her left hand expectantly.

"I'm sorry. Again I never intended for a war to break out in the process. Never wanted to drag you into the politics of my life--"

"***Well, you did.***"

"If I could have Nui out of my hair I would *jump* at the

opportunity. *I'm sorry.* All I can promise is a report to her master of her most recent and most *blatant* transgression and a wistful hope of someday bringing the woman to justice."

"The bitch is *dying* the next time I see her... Are you just gonna sit there or ***are you gonna fucking do something?***"

"I will do anything I can, give me your hand."

"...I can't."

"Why not?"

"I. Can't."

With another sinking realization she looked down and saw faint twitches in Ryuko's fingers and shoulder. The arm was too damaged to function. Grimly she reached into the mess and got to work bandaging what was left of Ryuko's right arm together from knuckles to elbow.

"Have you healed your own ails *at all?*"

"...There are three ways to do it. First is gone because my armor is now ruined completely after taking the force that would have killed me otherwise... Second won't work because the damage is too extensive... The third takes actively doing and that's something you're never supposed to fuck with on yourself unless in stable condition, *or on the verge of death*, because any fuck up is a hundred times worse to fix than straight injury... It takes concentration to not screw it up normally. Trying to distinguish what goes where, what is in the vessels, surrounding tissues, lymphatic system, and so on *while distracted* is... Sayzaswoohigos... *Unwise.*"

"Can this be healed?"

"I... Elven flesh, I don't know. If nothing has been outright destroyed completely then *maybe.*"

"Houka could give it a try. He knows some restoration arts and I'm sure he could do some good for you--"

"*Fuck no.* Not that. Anything but a blind surgeon. I-... W-We did *n-not accept the aid of the field medics, they were clumsy and brutish in their mending...* ***I would never entrust even a low-born to work out any of that. Let alone a primiti- Gah!***"

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She was being dragged toward stone structures under the protection of a great clear blue dome of energy. A sword hilt was jutting out of the side of her stomach between ribs and pelvis. Her muscles were dead from exhaustion necessitating the two silent armored forms that carried her off a boat and forward across the stone dock by an arm each. The procession was halted by a pair of *low-born* strapped with bags who pulled out some medical supplies and told them to set her down.

They dropped her.

Rolling to her side the pain from within the wound was preventing her from relighting her own red shield but at least the audible sizzle of automatic repair to her insides was slowly working to heal it. The two medics attempted to bandage her as she was but she punched one of them when he tried to touch her.

"Shit! What are you doing we're trying to help you!"

"I told you they were fucked in the head. Listen lady your own strange healing process thing is drawing your own damn blood to fix the hole as far as we know. Your body cannibalizing itself isn't solving the problem! We need to get you on intravenous and an operating table NOW!"

They stopped trying to work when a pair of white armored hands pulled them off her and shoved them away roughly. Staring at each others visor no words were said. None were needed.

The woman still visibly healing her own bruises nodded her head once before planting her heel on the hip facing up and bent down to grab the sword hilt. Without warning or preparation she just tore the blade free of the wound in a shower of blood that made the medics cringe.

Casually discarding the blade without a care of the writhing body below she took a knee then punched a white gauntlet straight down into the gore with a squelch. From the hole she pulled out a crystal arrowhead pumping out a nauseating power disruptor pulse in between blood soaked fingers. Crushing the thing into sparking dust with shaking disgust she used her other hand to cover the wound. In seconds a blue light fired up from within healing the damage like it was never there. The smell of burning flesh was too much for the medics and one of them turned away from the scene to retch.

Testing her mobility from the ground she clasped arms with the white gauntlet. The woman had always been reliable. Pulled to her feat she left the disturbed medics behind to catch up to the other members of the squad heading back to the *station*. Nervous troops sent to collect them like normal were ignored.

It had been two weeks since they had been deployed into the combat

field and had been fighting nonstop since. Normally a relief team would have come to extract them within days at most. Taken them back to the station to refuel. Reaching the doors to the main facility guards stood in their way, she punched one aside while the woman in white to her left knocked out the other.

Fighting a war with no idea what was going on was annoying. Being stolen from their eternal rest was annoying. Being treated as a *weapons platform* instead of *people* was annoying.

Being left to suffer and fight for weeks was *unacceptable*.

For the first time since *the reawakening* they were *angry*. Steadily marching in formation through the stone halls in full activation *low-born* civilian staff and troops alike panicked and ran for cover before them in fear. Approaching a large set of doors armed guards tried to threaten them with spears.

Spears.

Completely ignoring the ineffectual weaponry they barged right in and interrupted a meeting of everyone they figured was the *leadership* of this war. Zeroing in on the one individual they recognized the most who oversaw their deployment orders they shoved everyone trying to stop them aside. Two pinned the woman nearly frightened to death to a wall to hold her there so a black and red helm could stare her in the face. They very rarely ever spoke to their *handlers*, but today *the action* was deemed *warranted*.

"We will fight your war against the primitives Low-Born. We will be the tip of your spear for that is what we know how to be, and we will do what we inevitably came to do best. We will fight for you, but we will not SUFFER for you. If you think us as mere deployable automatons to toss into indefensible positions and wait to see who or what steps out victorious AGAIN, we will end you children without a second thought! And before you think you can get away with this remember why YOU needed US YOU PATHETIC CURS!"

Letting her armor return to its normal state of fabric and fine metal mesh layers she spit on the woman's shoes before turning on her heel to leave with a swish of her sleeves. Group following suit plates and exposed skin melted in smoke to become the swaths of luxurious material that made up their colorful dresses and hooded robes while heading for the **collector**. Heels still angrily striking stone in a rhythmic clacking wholly unique to their own *warriors*.

The *Huuminsah* were actively developing ways to fight them. Wound them. They needed to recharge *eventually* with such a heavy shift in the conflict coming, *low-born outrage* be damned.

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She hunched forward grabbing her head with her free hand. Spike of pain ripping through her skull and rolling down her spine as the static roared into more than she could process. For just a moment it was as if she felt the full weight of *the madness* trying to dump into her mind *while conscious*.

It was *excruciating*.

"Are you sure you're well enough to not be in the latter category? *Field medics?*"

The question went ignored while Satsuki continued working and tearing off strips of white. So long as Ryuko was breathing she was at least sure the woman was still alive. Eventually finished she let the rain wash her hands clean of blood. Wiping bangs plastered to her forehead out of the way she tried to get Ryuko up out of the mess. Arms slapped away the stubborn woman attempted to do it herself without help. After three failed attempts to pull herself up by the slippery smooth wood railing she stopped pushing those helping hands away and let herself get hauled up to her feet where Satsuki ducked under her left arm to shoulder her indignant mass.

"I know Elves-... *er, Fair folk in general?* Are *supposed* to be light on their feet, but to be *this* light can't be normal. Or is that too broad a generalization? Are there significant physical differences between-"

"*Shut up. Yes it's normal to be a fragile little shit. I'm enough to be healthy, and plenty strong enough to kick your ass without breaking anything. Let go.*"

"You can't even stand let alone walk. I feel like I'm just stating the obvious but I must inform you that *no*, in your present condition you *cannot*. You are critically injured, anemic, and probably dehydrated on top of everything. You need serious medical attention!"

Slipping herself out of the hold Ryuko unsteadily dodged an attempt to grab her and caught the railing with her good hand to keep herself upright. Her right arm still limply dangling.

"Fuck off, *I've been through worse- FUUU!*"

Releasing the wood to grab her head again another spike of *rusty nails* rolled through her spine that sent her into a wild coughing fit hacking up blood. Catching her before she could fall either

onto the deck or worse *overboard into the rocks* Satsuki managed to overpower her with a hold from behind and kept her from thrashing until the fit passed.

"Ryuko what is wrong!?"

"*It's back and it hurts... Get off... **Get off me!***"

"Not when you are a danger to yourself! Ryuko?"

Her head fell forward as her legs gave out. Dragging her away from the edge Satsuki laid her down to start slapping her cheek.

"Ryuko? Ryuko!?"

Kneeling down she bent over to try and listen for a heartbeat, breathing, *anything*. She sighed in relief when Ryuko coughed herself back into alertness.

"Now you're passing out."

"*No fucking shit.*"

"Save the sarcasm we need to get you to a doctor and we need to do it *now*. Where are we?"

"North. *Far north... Lynnval.*"

"*Lynnval?* What?"

"The boat. *Lynnval*. She's an old girl that got pressed into service as a... *uh... fuck what would the word be... Cargo hauler troop transport thing, something like that*, during the war that ended the Second Era. The... **avionics** are fucked, her spine was smashed into pieces on the crash landing that killed the crew, the lowest deck is completely destroyed, but the old **power assembly core** still works. Keeps the lights on and the *uh* **transference array** working so long as the... Fuel tanks still have some left to give."

"...Elven magic?"

"*Machines*. They built it, but they didn't design the shit. No. *They just copied us*. Took everything they thought was useful and used it after we were *gone... They were animals among animals. Feeble... mortal. They didn't figure out being civilized until after we were long gone... And even then when they forcefully pulled us back from the mirror they had the nerve to call US weird.*"

"...We?"

Ryuko snapped her mouth shut. Looking straight up she studied the

clouds again with a frown. Annoyed at the rain. Annoyed that her armor that could fix this mess had been destroyed *by her own fuck up*. Annoyed at the persistent questions probing her from this *confusing human*.

"This hasn't been the first time you've spoken about the topic in such a way. *Ancient relic? War stories?* You never did elaborate where your appearance comes from. If not blood then where *does it come from?* What *is* an *Elven Nymph?* From the way you make events sound, it's as if you were *there*."

"Can we not?"

"You almost accidentally *killed yourself*. I need to know what is going on."

"Look... We, *Fae*, we're not- We *exist* beyond the flesh and live partly within *the weave of life* itself okay? *The hair the eyes* it's all a manifestation of flesh taken form for a soul. *If that's true*. Just ignore the... *they pass on their own*."

Staring down at Ryuko's face she carefully reviewed every one of their short discussions, pieced together the odd remarks, the few *fits of incoherence*, and tried to make sense of it. The only possible explanation making her doubt her own sanity. There was a way for Ryuko to know a dead language so well, how to cast the *old war magics* so easily, and how she would be so capable of fighting an army while so young.

She would have to have been around when there were teachers. But that's... impossible. That would mean she's over... No. Focus.

"The clouds are bad, heavy storm is coming soon and we need to get into cover. Where are the other idiots?"

"I- I ordered them up. They should be with us soon. Forget the weather though, you-"

"Want to get out of the rain before it becomes a *storm*."

"But-"

"Damn it not now! *Later... It fucking hurts*."

Gripping her head again Satsuki didn't push her. There were details in play she was obviously not privy to and she was hopefully learning fast enough to adapt. She asked if a suspicion was correct though.

"*Fae soul* and Elven blood are close enough to let the amalgamation that was you live, but the disconnect is hurting you. You've said you shouldn't be here would this be why?"

"...The *low born* called *Inheritors* insane for a reason."

"Would there be a cure? A way to lessen the effect at least."

"Are we *really* having this discussion?"

"Couldn't hurt--"

"It *fucking* does."

"It could help?"

"...I don't know. No *Inheritors* ever lived to old age, *the norm was dying young*... I've made it this long and well, *look where that's got me*."

That was the last thing she wanted to hear. *More bad news and reasons to worry*. It left her with no idea what to even say. Staring at each other for a minute Ryuko just closed her eyes and grabbed at her chest when it felt tight again.

The wait for the others was short at least. A pair of figures dragging a third came up to the surface to join them. Nonon releasing one of Houka's arms rushed up after spotting them and slid across wet wood to take up a position opposite Satsuki over the bloody wreck of a woman on the deck.

"Satsuki- *Holy shit, is she dead?*"

She protected her face with an arm when Ryuko spit blood at her for saying that.

"Fucking ewww, why the do you bleed black!?"

"Keep in mind she's not a normal patient Nonon, as you can see though she's still hanging onto life by a thread. Sitrep?"

"We have our kit, everyone's sore as hell, Dog's losing his mind trying to go back down to draw the walls *or something* like a loon, and we're somehow missing multiple wounds."

"Good enough. You can thank *her* for the medical situation."

"*Shit*."

"Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, dog was right."

"*Nonon*."

"I kid! *A little*. Speaking of care what am I looking at?"

"Nothing beyond a wrap trying to stem the flow from her arm."

"Okay. Wake up *Queen of the woods*, how bad are things?"

"*Fucking... peachy.*"

"Looks like it, losing blood inside *and* out. Alright new bandages, ointment, painkillers- *Wait*, Elf, I have no idea if anything will actually work... DOG GET YOUR ASS UP HERE!"

Swinging pack off her back she tore into multiple pockets and passed various things to Satsuki so they could replace the makeshift bandaging with proper ones while Uzu shoved Houka up the stairs enough for him to realize there was a situation that required his attention. Rushing over he knelt down next to Nonon to assess the damage, she yelled at Uzu when he tried to join the circle.

"*Oh no* pervert stay the fuck over there!"

"Ma'am she's being ridiculous."

"Find a way off the ship, Nonon concentrate."

"Dog anything toxic to her?"

"In the aid kit?"

"Yeah."

"You're asking *me*?"

"DOG!"

"I don't know I've never studied pure Elf biology! It's not like that was an *option* back in the college!"

"No risks. Nonon nothing internal we can deal with a skin rash if it happens, Houka try to close this hand up before it splits in two."

Pulling staff from his back Ryuko looked at it and went ballistic trying to scramble away.

"NO NO NO NOOOO!"

"Ryuko hold still and let us help you! Nonon!"

"On it!"

"TAKE THAT SHIT AWAY-AHH!!!"

With two women pinning her down Houka was able to place the stone

over her arm. Calling forth the necessary spell to start knitting the wound together her yells became an ear piercing shrill shriek loud enough to echo out into the woods around.

She passed out from the pain as flocks of frightened birds took to the sky by the hundreds.

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She woke up feeling like death rolled over. Smelling sweet smoke and hearing the crackle of a small fire among a jumble of low voices she fought the lead weight of her limbs and sat up from where she lay on her back. Trying to crack her stiff joints she found her right arm non-responsive and strapped into a sling around her neck.

In the fog of being half awake she got a satisfying crack from her neck. Rubbing an ear she must of rolled on in her sleep she started trying to get out of the lumpy bed when she was assaulted by questions.

"Awake? How do you feel? Is your arm better? How are your bruises tending, I chose not to touch them as the strain could be enormous and I don't know your constitution, I was worried when you passed out from the hand procedure. Are your ears sensitive? Does your hair always hold a candle's glow?"

Startled by the male voice bombarding her from just inches away she flew back into a wall, opened her eyes, and let loose a wild shot from her outstretched palm.

"FUCK!"

"Get down!"

Satsuki tackled Inumuta off his chair when Ryuko yelled. The red shot of energy shattered the wooden seat into a cloud of debris, some landing into a fire pit in the middle of the room, the rest sailing clean across the dark log cabin into the far wall that cracked outward from the impact. When the dust from ceiling beams finally settled Nonon was the first to poke her head out from cover under a table against a wall.

"Okay I know four-eyes is annoying, but you don't have to bring the roof down!"

Getting up out of their suddenly employed hiding places Uzu went to inspect the wall. He was unable to pull the wooden chunks out of it in amazement while Satsuki got off the floor and quietly ordered Houka to get up and *never do that again*.

"But--"

"*Houka Inumuta I need you alive, that's an order.*"

"Y-Yes ma'am."

Righting the surviving chair of two she set it down next to the wooden bed-frame layered in various tarps and spare cloths, sighed, and gave Ryuko a visual once over waiting for the woman to calm down.

"***What... What the fuck Kiryuin.***"

"I will apologize on his behalf for his poor bedside manners. Are you feeling any better?"

"***Where...***"

"There was a wood ramp off the Lynnval that took us on a path up to an overgrown campsite overlooking the area. The place has been abandoned for some time by the looks of it, but we were able to set up in the largest solid structure without much issue."

"***The research camp.***"

"I take it you know where we are. The storm rolled in heavy and it's already dark out so we planned to stay the night. Again I ask if you feel better. Any problems?"

Rubbing her forehead she crossed her legs under herself and tried to wrap herself in the remains of her cloak.

"***I feel like shit.***"

"*Feel... likely expletive. Poorly? Unfortunate, but anything else might have been too much to hope for.*"

Looking up from her lap Ryuko stared at her in disbelief.

"***How did I get here?***"

Concentrating hard Satsuki's eyebrows furrowed as she put a fist under her chin. Her lips soundlessly moving until she pieced together a response.

"I carried you on my back while you were unconscious."

Either she had taken a blow to the head or Kiryuin was actually following her. Satsuki explained herself in her silence.

"I told you I was interested in the material Ryuko. If Sylvan is your default language, *and that's highly likely given who you*

might be, I will make the effort and learn as needed."

Taking stock of herself Ryuko pulled out her water skin to take a drink. That damn tightness was back after firing off the blast. She had burned power she realistically could not afford to waste so carelessly right now. She needed it to heal. The blood reserve was exhausted, her own blood must be nearly empty, and it would take hours of concentration to draw from the air. The fact she woke up at all at least meant she was beyond the reach of death, for now.

*"**That...** That's needed not- not needed."*

"Sivdinhos Rahnuuhosyoe Gossivvalzasshegos, The offer stands."

"...We'll see Eyebrows."

"As you wish. My questions?"

"Think the hemorrhaging stopped. The damage has been done though."

"Any idea how long it will be until you're back to one-hundred percent? Two, three weeks?"

*"...Weeks? **Weeks Kiryuin!?** This shit? Months. *Minimum.* When fall rolls in it could be sped up but until then-"*

"We don't have months. We need to get back to the Empire and soon."

*"Tough shit Kiryuin, I'm fucked. As a whole you're all also fucked. I don't know how fast your ass heals but this bullshit isn't a paper-cut. I want the shit I was promised too, but facts are facts. If we started right now no one would survive the trip over the mountains. And even if we did that road leads right back to *Ironwood*, which is probably a smoldering pile of ash full of *angry priests* right now."*

"Then we find another way. We have to. Where are we?"

"I couldn't tell you the name of it now... It'll be different though for sure, so useless. You wanted to know where I came from? We're a few hours out from a town. Largest port city for a long ways along the northern coast in both directions."

"A port might do."

Somewhere up above the roof thunder rolled signaling the continuation of the storm outside. The cabin's solid wood door and shuttered windows rattled lightly in the wind, but stood firm enough that they could collectively expect the protection from the elements to hold at least until morning.

Giving Ryuko some space Satsuki and her knights picked out clear spots around the cabin, unpacked bedrolls, and settled around the fireplace to determine how long their supplies could last.

"Could you stretch them Uzu?"

"I'm sorry Lady Satsuki, but we never got the chance to refill on grub in town. With what's left we can have a watery stew dinner tonight and that's it. Unless someone volunteers to slog it through the thunderstorm all night to whatever place *she* mentioned is nearby that's what we got."

Sitting under her hood Ryuko studied them as they went about whatever tasks they did. Pink and blue bickered while attempting to mend clothing items previously hung up to dry. Satsuki sat perfectly still staring into the fire while she boiled water in her metal tin. And evidently green was a cook, tending a metal pot taken out and suspended over the fire on a makeshift frame it was filled with a number of things from their bags that filled the space with a meaty aroma.

Before she knew it she slowly got up off the bed groaned through leg stretches and warily moved over to the fire. Taking an open space between Satsuki and Nonon the group all looked up at her before going back to their tasks.

She couldn't help but be mesmerized by a long ladle lazily swirling around the bubbling pot. Bit her lip when the wood would come up from below the surface with flecks of spice, pepper, and salt crystals still dissolving clinging to it. Things she could only bitterly dream of missing for so long.

She didn't even register the sound of the cook announcing that dinner was served. She watched as one by one metal bowls were pulled out and filled full with the food. Until the last was scraped out and it was all gone.

She was devastated. On the verge of tears her head bent forward. She should have known better than to grow attached to the prospect. She wasn't one of them. She only realized her name was being called when her shoulder was poked. Looking up Satsuki was holding two tins and frowning at her.

"Take it already."

Looking down at the thing with a spoon handle sticking out she still didn't fully register what was going on until Satsuki shoved it into her grasp and left it there to turn her attentions to digging into her own bowl.

While everyone else started eating she just looked down at it. She wanted it, needed it, but she couldn't just take it. *Could she?*

No.

Putting it aside she reached into an intact section of cloak and to everyone's surprise pulled out a sizable cloth sack from *nowhere*. Undoing the knot on top with difficulty, *having only one hand working was a pain in the ass*, she retrieved a loaf of bread still soft and warm as the minute it had been put there she bit and held in her mouth. With great hesitation she shoved the rest of the bag to Satsuki. While it was investigated she ate both.

Sir Oinken wouldn't get a conversation today, her throat already hurt from all the talking.

Given the bag from nowhere Satsuki set her bowl down and pulled out the contents so the group could see it.

"Bread? *Fresh* bread? Where did you get this? *When did you get this?*"

"*Sivrahwoozas.*"

"Town? Ironwood I would guess. A nice surprise. Thank you."

Once again unresponsive they let her be so long as she would eat and shared the rest of the loaves among themselves.

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The following morning came after the rain clouds left, leaving the dirt clearing full of weed patches outside the cabin a wet mess they gathered upon. Milling about after packing their bags again Houka had pulled out a map trying to get an idea of where they were in the world from the apparent *local*, but *she* had other idea's.

"Could you just point it out on the map--"

"You've already done enough damage trying to be helpful, fuck off!"

"B-But you were bleeding to death! I fixed it!"

"You fucking think this is fixed!? This is a mess!! This is possibly crippled for life you fucking dipshit! You don't know how to fix humans, why the fuck did you think you could set this!?"

"I went through a whole year of elemental white magic with the college--"

"Yeah, and you learned how to speed up cellular processes while applying a fucking burner into the wound to mechanically seal it. You destroyed my Median nerve! I can't fix what isn't there anymore! You've made me a cripple you- you- blind *PRIMITIVE!!*"

Seething in rage her eyes were aglow as she stared him down. Her yells once again sending flocks of birds scattering away toward the distance. He was confused when she didn't continue into a tirade of swears as she had done previously in accordance with his notes on her personality. As a whole they were confused by the odd choice of insult. Ryuko put her hand over her eyes when she realized the atrocious meaning was likely lost on them all.

"I *um*, my glasses are so I can see *better*. I'm not close to blind, in a pinch I can function without--"

"*Not with your eyes idiot*. You don't... You lack the sense to feel that which gives you life. Your heart is blind to *the weave* yet you attempt to bend life into shapes you cannot see."

"*The what?* Wait, you know how magic works in a body!?"

"The weave of life... Are you telling me you *don't*?"

"Naturally? No one does. No one I've heard of anyway. The knowledge was either lost to time or never learned by man."

"...*You're lying*. I know for a *fact* the *Huuminsah* knew. They fucking knew to target us to take that out! DON'T TELL ME YOU DON'T KNOW AFTER FUCKING WITH ME!!!"

Worked up to the point of potentially harming someone Satsuki decided that this wasn't getting them anywhere and intervened. Relieving Houka of the map she sent him to help the others try and find a road in the vicinity.

"If you let yourself get so worked up your wounds will reopen and we're going to be back to square one. Calm down. We need to get moving, do you know where we are and how we get from here to that port? If we need to move by ship than that's the plan unless a better one presents itself."

"Yeah, I know. Been here a couple times with... *I've been here*. Port's an... *Issue* though."

"People know you here?"

"*Oh they know alright*. Depending on how things have gone they might know you too."

"How?"

"Know anything about Imperial traders?"

"...An official trade mission?"

"Every three weeks through summer. Main boats leave in the Fall, come back in spring."

"Then we have a way out."

"*Eh?*"

"The Trading companies are all authorized by the crown. On top of that Nonon's family own one and have their hands in a few of the others. We're not sunk yet. Is there somewhere close to the town we could set up camp?"

"Why?"

"There should be a main office near to the docks that acts as the company local headquarters and storehouse. We should be safe if we can reach it, but that trip will take careful planning if the locals are otherwise going to be hostile. Uzu and Houka should be able to move about in relative obscurity, comparatively, and act as a go between to plan the move. At the very least they could go in and acquire supplies until we can organize better with a direct view of the situation on the ground. Is there such a place to set up?"

Turning her eyes up to the east she thought it over. There was such a place, and its physical features were something that could only help her right now, but it was going to be rough *personally*. She wasn't entirely sure she was ready to face that. Staring down at her feet sinking slightly into the mud she gathered herself. She had to be strong. She now knew that someone was at least partially responsible for the hell that was unleashed on her life, someone she could exact some kind of revenge from. Channeling emotions into resolve she looked Satsuki in the eye. And immediately looked away when the tightness in her chest came back forcing her to grab the stained binding around her torso.

"There's a lake in a clearing just west of the city hidden in the rolling forest hills. Bad land for farms so they never bothered spreading in that direction. The cabin should still be there. If not then the place itself should be secluded enough."

"Sounds like it will do... Aside you keep doing *that*. Injuries?"

"I'll... be fine. It's just strain from casting. *Nothing more.*"

"In your *chest?*"

"...Do you people *really not* know *anything* about how casting works?"

"Houka spoke the truth. It is not knowledge that can be found, and believe me when I say plenty of people have been trying for a long time."

"**Figures...** Cast too much, heart takes the strain of channeling magic through it, alright? Everything this week was a shit ton more than mine is used to handling. ***I'll live.***"

"Heart? The whole secret to casting is *using the heart*?"

"...Yes and no."

"Complicated?"

"All comes down to your lineage. You need the right *kind* of heart and body systems to use it for casting. *Elven heart. Fae heart.* Same biological construction more or less."

"And that's where you feel magic?"

"Basically. The stuff is everywhere, in everything in varying concentrations. Just a matter of feeling out the flow and redirecting it to do things you want it to do."

"And this is why you don't trust a stone user to heal you? They *weave* what they cannot feel? *Surgeon with no eyes, would be blind...* Typically the only ones who *need* stones will be Humans, and none can feel the flow of magic as it is. Correct?"

"*Somebody learns fast.*"

"I told you I was interested in such. Will you need assistance moving? A few hours walk could strain some things."

"I'm *fine.*"

On her call the knights came out of the brush and gathered. Told the plan they fell in line behind Ryuko after she brought them to a deer run.

The roads are not likely to have people on them, but better safe than sorry.

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By midday they came to a hill some distance still out, but had a view of the city they were headed to. Seeing their *guide's* bruised legs starting to shake from effort Satsuki called for a

temporary stop. The shade made it a good spot to wait out the worst of the sun.

Taking a seat next to Ryuko leaning against the base of a large tree she looked out at the city and the harbor beyond. It was more built up than she expected. Enough black roofed buildings were around to house at least a couple thousand people and strips of golden crops reached towards them up in wooded hills. To the right in more hills faint wisps of smoke could be seen, even further the black remains of a large fortification stuck out into the sky like a burned corpse the forest was trying to reclaim. The green treetops themselves seemed to stretch forever to the left, but not encroach upon the vast field of blue going north to the horizon. The northern ocean. Focusing on the harbor full of sailing masts she was just able to make out a tiny gold flag in the wind as promised. Now all they had to do was get aboard and sail home. Simple on paper at least.

"Does the place have a name?"

"...*Munze*. City of silver on *Golem bay*. The big rock wall over there if you were wondering."

"So the hills are full of mines? Explains the smoke."

"Far as I know yeah. Lot of jewelry made and sold away."

"And boat loads of bullion for the Imperial treasury among others I would guess. That local headquarters will be well armed and heavily fortified. Should make it stand out enough. Idea's where it could be around the docks?"

"No. It's been a while and things have moved... *What happened to the church spires?*"

"Where?"

"Right. Three stone towers. There used to be a forth of the same size and a larger bell tower."

"A church getting knocked down without a larger replacement somewhere? Unusual. Could be reconstruction in progress. Or something rather drastic happened here."

"*I'd say it was pretty fucking **drastic**.*"

"The castle ruin is telling that *something* major happened. Care to elaborate?"

"**No.**"

"Information helps."

"...I was a dumbass, shit went tits up fast including the setting of a lot of fires, and your blonde *friend* took advantage of the situation and killed my dad. *Everyone else too probably.*"

Reaching into her cloak she produced the silver knife and turned it to catch the light.

"*You have my condolences to the departed.* In no sense of the word possible is she a *friend* though."

"What was her name again?"

"Nui Harime. High Inquisitor, Imperial assassin, professional *boot licker*. Former orphan of questionable origin my mother *befriended*. I believe you said she stole that from you?"

"My dad by trade was an enchanter. Pretty much the only magic he was good at. He could just barely feel the weave, but he was only a half-blood human so even that was kinda... Anyway he wanted to make sure I learned everything I could from the start. Including his trade."

Flipping the dagger in her grasp she punched it through a flat boulder poking out of the dirt between them without using any real force and let go. Blue shimmer on it's blade darkening leaving it to sit there embedded solidly in the stone.

"He had a lab at home, let me in there every so often to practice. This thing has a new handle but this was one of the prototypes of his life's work rediscovering. *Rending*. Cuts through *anything* and takes hours to properly weave. *He could make it in minutes...* She must have stolen it in the... *chaos...* Stabbed him through the gut and left him to die... *Where I found him.*"

Ryuko's face fell, eyes lost somewhere in a long stare into nothing beyond the distance. Reaching over Satsuki grabbed the knife and pulled it free to study it herself. Remembering the countless number of times it was put to her throat with childish sounding threats full of disdain at perceived slights against Ragyo as a parent that were never carried through. Never saw it as magical though. Willing it to function the blue shimmer along its cutting edge activated as stated and was markedly familiar.

"*Rending* you said?"

"Yeah. Old Fae blades used it."

"...Now what are *those* like?"

"You're carrying one."

Turning with an inquisitive eye Ryuko pointed at her belt.

"Bakuzan? This is *plains* style."

"Whatever you call it. Light, curved, slashing sword made to deliver cuts on flesh and deliver enchantment to cut through everything else. Thought it was odd when I put it back in the sheath while you were knocked out."

"It was granted to me by the court mages as a gesture from the throne in recognition of the service of my order of knights and the army at my personal call have done. I was informed it was unique and took every blacksmith and enchanter immediately available to the royal armory to produce just the one sword."

"Hate to break it to ya, but the enchantment is a flawed copy. Whoever did the work didn't know what they were doing, they just took the energy pattern and plastered it onto a different hunk of steel. If you run the two blades edge to edge the charge of the actual *magic edge* made to part matter will be the same making them repel each other like magnets."

Curious she drew her sword where she sat and propped it on her knee flat back down. Willing both to work they indeed shared the same blue glow, and when she carefully tried to put them together they forced themselves apart. Trying to run knife over the length of the sword produced a small shower of magic sparks like flint striking steel.

"Flawed or not it has served me unfailingly. What about your own blade? It was rather odd from what I recall."

Ryuko produced the half scissor from her chest and stared at it in her palm.

"*That?*"

"More old magic. Mechanical transformation enchantment. Allows change in size but keeps its mass."

"Not Rending?"

"No, it has both. And a second transform to make a third layer on the thing."

Demonstrating the functionality she flicked the blade first into sword size, then while standing up into its full extended length with another flick which she turned and pointed down at the throat of an unwanted observer who had been creeping up from behind. Blue haired man sputtering an apology while trying to stay away from the angry red glowing cutting edge of the curved great-sword she moved about without effort.

"Please don't! You have to forgive me for eavesdropping, this is utterly fascinating material. Multiple enchantments on a single

item? Whomever taught you must have been a grand master of the art!"

"Yeah, and this was my final test before he said I knew everything he could teach me himself. And now I know he was killed just for his stupid work. *By your people.*"

To his relief she put the sword away along with the knife back into her cloak. Rest declared over they were back on the move. Satsuki still had a last question for her after noting where each blade went.

"Why do you keep it loose in some cloth instead of within whatever secure storage method you have at your disposal?"

"If the cloak gets shredded anything in it is lost for good. Advanced *bag of holding* style stuff."

"I see. Item of sentimental value kept close to the heart for safekeeping?"

"...**Shut up.**"

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Several hours later along winding single file paths through the forest around the city's farthest farm field outskirts they reached the clearing. Declared a safe enough action Ryuko took them off the deer runs and onto a dirt path that was painfully familiar. The trees might have been slightly taller, but everything about the place felt the same. Her heart was pounding from her nervousness.

The place so far looked like it had escaped the mobs.

Which meant there was a possibility, *however small*, that just maybe so someone else also survived that night. It was a relentless hope swelling in her chest she just couldn't smash down.

And then she heard something that might have been her mind playing tricks on her. Saw a fraction of a puff of smoke that might have been her eyes succumbing to a new form of her *madness*.

They walked until they came around a last bend and spotted an open grass field. Before the treeline to the right was a large lake, nestled into the base of a hill on the left stood a lone two-story cabin with a front porch overlooking the clearing.

And Ryuko's heart nearly stopped with a gasp.

By the front of the building they could see a woman with long black hair tied up in a braid taking laundry down from a pair of clotheslines where it had dried through the noon sun. The smoke came out the top of a stone chimney belonging to a kitchen already in full swing. With some trepidation Ryuko told them to wait by a fence marking the property line and started stumbling up the path to the house with uncharacteristically lead feet. Woman noticing the hooded figure approaching got a better hold on her basket.

"Halt! Who are you? Why are you here?"

Stopping halfway up the path the woman finally took a good look at her. She dropped the basket.

"*I-Impossible... I saw the fires from the market. Y-You can't be- If it's-... If it's really- t-**take off hood now!***"

Ryuko complied with the rough order. Grasping her hood with her working hand she pulled it back and let her ears spring up. She was crying as the woman covered her mouth with both hands.

"N-Nanna Kinue?"

"It's you... It's really you... It *is* you... *Ryu! RYU!*"

Kinue ran down the path as fast as her legs would carry her, laundry entirely forgotten, to snatch Ryuko up in an embrace lifting her from the ground. She buried her chin in the ruined material on Ryuko's shoulder with tears rolling down her face. Ryuko broke down shortly after to cry on her shoulder as well.

Nanna had survived.

"I had no idea, no one did! Everyone thought you had died in the fire. Oh Lady Matoi I'm sorry I had given up hope *years* ago. Gods you were *six!* SIX! How did you survive the revolution!?" Oh gods, *what happened to you?*"

"I-I'm... alive Nanna. I got out before the place fully went up in smoke thanks to dad. Saw the mobs and decided to skip out into the woods where I was sure to be alone. *Safe.* The first few months were... *Rough.* But I managed thanks to some of what Uncle Mohawk taught me."

"You should have come here! I was worried sick!!"

"Then they would have found me eventually and burned *your* house down too. Would have killed you and Mohawk as *conspirators.*"

"Oh Ryu... But does that mean other people... Did anyone else-... D-Did he?"

The question was beyond hope. Not asked out loud, nor answered as such. Ryuko standing on her own feet again simply looked down and shook her head. Digging into her cloak she produced her stuffed pig and held him out to her. Taken by a shaking hand Kinue looked at it while another round of tears started up. Still holding the toy she wrapped Ryuko into another hug.

"Well, at least *you* and the *good knight* survived milady. I'm sure Lord Isshin would have been happy with that."

Finally looking around she noticed the other individuals in various disheveled states standing a ways away at the fence. Her eyes lingered on their tarnished gold buckles and emblems. She knew what Imperial seals looked like.

"Ryuko. Who are *they*?"

"S-Some very persistent idiots... C-Can we... *s-stay here for a bit?*"

Stepping back she finally looked Ryuko up and down. Wiping her tears away with a smile and nod.

"You've certainly grown up into a fine young woman milady. For you, there's always space and I'm sure we can find enough spots to fit people here and there."

"...Nanna?"

"Yes?"

Ryuko stumbled forward to hug the woman again. Her legs failing her Kinue was forced to grab her and pull her in tight. Neither wanting to let go lest the whole meeting be just a cruel dream waiting to end on a bitter awakening.

"I-... I-... *I can't f-feel my h-hand Nanna... It hurts... **It all hurts.***"

Grabbing the back of Ryuko's head she gently rocked from side to side while holding her. Shushing her crying like she had done so long ago.

"*It's okay Ryu... Everything will be okay... **As the sun rises, the clouds depart... A new day roles on, a new cycle starts... As the flowers grow, soon we will know, how it will go... The good times are coming, and soon they will show.***"

Standing apart as observers Satsuki couldn't help but smile at the

scene. She didn't know how this family of a sort came to be, but at least *something* positive had come from all they had been through so far. When Houka tried to step forward she stopped him with her arm. She made sure it was clear no one would interrupt. Proper family was something to cherish.

It was a long time before anyone moved.

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A great many miles south east of them in contrast, a great many people were moving in small groups. Converging on a single point under cover of darkness in the utmost secrecy with plenty of supplies and munitions. What these individuals as a whole were about to undertake was technically *high-treason*.

But *The Order* demanded it, so it would come to be.

Standing high on a stone parapet one morning a pair of steely eyes would look through a pair of binoculars toward the coastline, his mouth pursed in a grim line at what was gathered there. A pair of individuals behind him already in their full equipment like many other soldiers responding to a call to arms. The first in the fort's history. Realizing the full gravity of the situation developing his voice was low, but even still it shook their chests with its power. His determination.

"So, it has come to *this*... Have all non-combat personnel evacuate to the northern bank of the river and use the evacuation as cover to start planting charges under all but the northernmost dock. If they've come for a war, then by Aura we'll give them a war. Lieutenant, *I need my hammer*."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the *long* delay, things were busy. As a small spoiler I can give the name of this technical "arc".

Welcome to act two: *The Kingdom of Aphaea*

Satsuki has suspicions, Sanageyama in another plane of reality was a sou-chef, and Ryuko was allowed a little bit of happiness. *The price was steep, she better enjoy it while it lasts.*

Upcoming eventually maybe someday subject to change: Existential suffering, bloody *bloody* conflict, and tea.

As always thank you for reading.

I swear I'm trying to finish R and B. It's happening eventually.

Prinzessin

Chapter Summary

“Oh gods hear my plea! Righteous Aura let your humble servant live to witness the great sun of life again! Skilled Vulcan let this armor's bearer live to test its craftsmanship once more! Dreadful Mors let thy frozen blade fall upon another and let me live!”

Soldiers prayer – unknown

Chapter Notes

Holiday Surprise.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Be it in a command tent patiently awaiting morning field reports, on a borrowed boulder in the shade overlooking foreign lands, or by a campfire late into the night there eventually came times where she was forced to simply wait. One touching reunion of a sort up the path was no exception. But, at the same time she could not realistically afford to stand around doing *absolutely nothing*. While she could not act for a number of reasons she could still think to better prepare for the next time action *could* be taken. *One should be prepared for each and every step as they move forward*. So per the usual she turned inward to get cracking on whatever pressing matter came to mind first.

Nonhuman Auxiliary Logistics.

What if they had found her stricken with illness, or came down with such now while weakened after the battle? What if she had been injured by previous accident or conflict before contact had been made? What if she could not have been physically moved from that forest regardless of her eventual desire to do so? No plans had been so much as discussed for such potential eventualities on the way north. The thought had simply not occurred to them that someone so purportedly, and as they had witnessed first hand so *profoundly*, capable of violence could have been harmed or otherwise incapacitated.

An oversight that could not happen again.

With potential markets in reach medicine in whatever form was compatible, food that was agreeable, and any other kinds of consumable supplies Ryuko could conceivably need was going to be on hand. *Supplies in general still need to be restocked.* They also had to figure out if it was possible to physically carry such a pack even if they waited for her to consider herself healthy enough for travel, and load sharing. *Her cloak has, had? Storage ability beyond the typical augmented carry sacks. If she can make more even if just lesser versions it could help greatly.* If any other specialized kit needed to be acquired to accommodate the unusual extra body. *She claimed to carry everything she needs, how much of it is still accessible and useful I wonder.* If that body could withstand typical horseback riding on potential future land travel, or force them to use slower drawn carts. If that body could still be moved through populations without drawing unwanted attentions. *If that body could withstand an entirely different kind of vigorous riding under the most intimate of personal attentions-*

And unfortunately, just like last night's failed attempts at concentration through fire gazing, she was once again forced to a stop on account of *intrusive thoughts* burning from within. Conjured images of *skin laid bare* mercilessly shoved away, as she readjusted her footing on the ground while taking stock of herself.

Once, one short almost *daydream* for lack of a better word, upon first meeting the woman was relatively excusable. She had quite honestly never seen someone... *quite like her* before anywhere in her travels around Imperial lands. The hair, the eyes, hell the completely perfect *skin* was even a rarity among the least labored of people. A *second* in the following hours while trying to think about *her* was *odd*, but still somewhat explainable then for the same reason. A real live Fae was something evidently extraordinary to behold in person.

For days now though?

With no sign of stopping any time soon even in the face of important matters she needed to process. In fact the longer time went on the more *pervasively perverse* these *heated* interruptions to her usual thoughts were becoming.

Why? Why now, why here, why... Her?

A... *her.*

Was it because the woman was an *exotically attractive Fae*?

Or... was it because the Fae in question just so happened to be an exotically attractive woman?

That- No- no, no, no...

Truthfully even with her mother's constant nagging since she came of age she had not given the subject as a whole much thought. *Procreation* was a *legal obligation* of the heir to sustain the bloodline into the future. That was an unavoidable fact of life known since she was old enough to be drilled on royal etiquette as a whole. For just about as long the future existing at all was very much up in the air until certain questions could be satisfactorily answered though. Until then she therefore had no time for such a thing, no room in her day to day thoughts for it, and no reason for it to be any kind of focus. Which had carried forward since to now. Yet here she was. *Afflicted*.

Have I been affected by a spell?

No. Couldn't have been.

Contrary to what her knights had suggested she could not have been potentially *charmed*. Such effects were theorized to be possible, but even the greatest of grand-masters had never, *at least publicly*, successfully achieved anything more than the most subtle of suggestions by radically playing with people's perception of reality through illusions. There were myths and tales of Elves and their magic *cursing* people though to make them act against their normal wills, so to some degree it might be possible for such to exist given how much of those myths they had seen realized with their own eyes. However, in the relatively short time they had known *her* between the fighting, dips in and out of consciousness between bouts of extreme pain, and *teleportation* of all things it was frankly unbelievable if not utterly impossible for such a spell to have been up-kept *if* it had been set at all. Let alone strengthened over time.

If not from *without* though then this logically *had* to be something being entirely driven from *within*.

Which sent an icy chill down her core.

She *couldn't* be. She could not *afford* to be. Complications to the mission that could arise from getting into such intimate relations aside she was *not* someone with the liberty to be such. She was the heir to the throne. She alone in all the Empire had a *legal mandate* to *make children*. At least one. A successor by blood to keep the line going.

The Imperial Princess could *not* be attracted to another woman.

She clawed at anything that could refute it. Was it just Ryuko? Were there others that she could recall in such explicit detail if she tried on purpose for once? *Surely* if it were the case then Ryuko couldn't *possibly* be the *only* one to have had such an impact on her. And surely if *she* could intentionally conjure such

impressions to mind it would be split, or slanted, towards men as well of course. Being able to appreciate all sides is a thing that could happen. That was a situation that she could live with in harmony.

The cold feeling in her gut only grew as her memory returned results.

Fair servants from the palace in their uniform layers, lesser nobles around the Old District parading in the finest of seasonal fashions, the odd young housewife of country charms, tavern staff strutting with mugs while on the road, even members of her legion, and many others from every stripe of life imaginable in between. All the people she further realized she had been able to bring to mind for comparison in that sunlit clearing effortlessly. A few well met and on good terms. Others only recounted as seen in passing. People she should have had absolutely no logical reason to remember in any such detail then, and then those she probably *shouldn't* remember. Individual courtesans. Their *builds*, their faces, their... *specific manner of half-dress*.

Why are they now about the palace itself anyway as of late? Mother has to my knowledge never expressed so much as an interest in their 'services' actually. So why would they now be allowed in the grounds...

Mother.

If such were the case... was it possible that Mother was not the one coloring their arms length interactions in the baths as more than...

She quickly stopped the lines of thoughts before they spiraled out even further off into topics she was entirely unwilling to *unpack* at present.

Mercifully her internal struggles were shelved when more immediately pressing matters made themselves known. Snippets of exclamations in not one but *two* distinct languages reached her ears. From the fence she was unable to make out much of what was said over an intermittent breeze, but lulls in the waves that rolled across the grass provided just enough syllables and sounds that were unmistakable.

Whomever this local woman was living out here deep among the trees they evidently knew *Sylv*.

While it was impossible to judge just how proficient they were from there it looked to be enough to possibly hold conversation. Which led her to grimly surmise that they might then make for a suitable *backup translator* if things somehow managed to get worse. Which she wished was an impossibility after what they had faced thus far. A notion that could be discarded because she was going

to see things through after dragging that young Fae into her life. So much as another glance down that certain bruised form though told volumes on their situation's continued precariousness.

Aware of the broader world again she noted Uzu and Nonon had fallen into a hushed squabble over the merits of uninvited approach. She figured that more then likely meant they had both missed anything audible of substance entirely as well. Houka had returned to his book to flip through pages in search of something or other in between hard stares up the path though. Presumably from being the only one that seemed to have been paying complete attention. She nudged him with an elbow to get his ear to lean toward her.

"Catch something interesting?"

"Potentially." She eyed him curiously after the curt reply. More so after he accidentally tore a page and, barring the momentary stumble over his own fingers that caused it, didn't give the damage so much as a second glance. "I do not want to jump to wild conclusions though. Not with this."

"From the Sylvan?"

A curiosity that grew the longer it took him to answer her.

"Actually, no. Though now that you mention it that *is* an interesting thing to hopefully inquire about soon enough. Not exactly something someone just picks up for *the fun of it* I assume that a *Plan B* of sorts is forming?"

"So much as it is in my power we will *not* be losing anyone. In light of recent unfortunate developments though... *it would only be prudent.*"

He nodded and made a note to explore the option, *just in case*, before going back to his searching. Not long after the woman finally waved them forward up the path while she helped Ryuko start toward the house.

Aside from the noted odd language everything else on approach appeared to be nothing more than what came to mind when the place had been first mentioned. A cabin with black shingle roof weathered by heavy winters just like all the others they had seen from afar. Its worn wrap-around porch similarly covered so one could comfortably sit and watch nature go by. On closer inspection the windows were something of a novelty in how large they were for a home built to survive in the harsh northern winters. Though there were sturdy enough shutters present so they too were still potentially within the realm of *normal*.

Satsuki lead on at the head of their single file procession, and scooped up the abandoned wicker basket full of dry cloth along the way to bring it in for the now occupied woman. *First impressions are important after all.* Threshold crossed her first goal was achieved by placing the basket on an out of the way chair in a corner of a small front mudroom. After which she turned to have a proper look around as the others filed in. Where they collectively began to spot certain details about the place that didn't quite belong.

Beneath their feet was not rough muted stone cleaved into traversable chunks resistant to water, but a proper dark granite tile full of silver flakes that sparkled within the flat surface when they caught light. There were knobs to hang coats and cloaks along the short entryway walls as to be expected, but on some hanging garments were buttons and clasps that gave off a distinctly rich shine that could only be from genuine gold. Most out of place of all though was possibly the woman who they had come across herself.

"You poor thing you are positively, thoroughly, *filthy*. Dust and dirt and-... *oh my word this is your blood.* H-How much have you lost to stain all... *This?* What... What are you actually wearing? Or rather, *not*, wearing I suppose? *What manner of vestments have you be driven to?*"

Her enunciation was particularly, and after Ryuko started answering back very *familiarly* to Satsuki, concise. Her words unusually complex for what should by outside appearances be a peasant living in a hunter's refuge in the woods.

"Some clothes?"

"*Hardly.*" Individually the *things* might have been choice acquisitions someone saved towards for any number of reasons. The local mines immediately came to mind as a potential source of vaguely affordable supply. *Education* though was not such a comparably trivial investment. Why go to the trouble then live out far away from anywhere one could actually make use of it? It didn't make sense for such a person to be living out here instead of the city. Until Satsuki's focus turned toward the inner threshold beyond the two women. There was a dark varnished hallway lit from above by a small *mage-light* chandelier. Wall mounted lamps of similar intricate build provided arcane illumination deeper in passed a set of stairs that lead up a right hand wall to the second floor. Tell tale handiwork of a *potential master enchanter* bouncing off shiny surfaces to give the space a warm glow. Was this place Ryuko's home before heading south then? The woman a live-in protege to the mage's work with nowhere else to go after his untimely demise? "You are barely clad in scraps that are entirely beneath you."

The theory was shot down before Satsuki could even file it away

for further questioning.

"It's fine, Nanna. Nothing gets in the way, it does what's needed, and I- ***I don't really NEED much of anything. You know... Okay so some replacements might be in order NOW, but it was fine before, uh, s-stuff... happened.***"

"It is most certainly *not fine*. What is this mess about you even made of? *What manner of beast has such a hide?*"

"One dragon that I took down all by myself with a trap! Sort of."

"It- You did *what!*?"

"I-It wasn't so bad! Really! I just- Okay so admittedly that might have been a sorta stressful week or so back then, but I made my kill without so much as being noticed! I think. At the end it kinda noticed while... Ya know... So... I might still have some teeth in here somewhere actually."

A Nanny. Which seemed perfectly capable of following the excited explanation that quickly flew clear over all other ears present. Visibly distressed by it though she stopped to blink at Ryuko before sighing heavily with wry smile.

"I will of course wish to know all about your *extraordinary trials* in full, but before anything else your ***feathers*** are in need of a *thoroughly applied* cleaning milady. ***Off to bath you will go.***"

Separating to access a shelf she retrieved a towel, took a knee beside Ryuko, and took gentle hold of an ankle to avoid aggravating bruises.

"B-But *Nannaaa-*"

"*Feet*. We will not be tracking anything inside."

"I-"

"You are not getting out of this young lady."

"But-"

"Ryuko *Matoi von Aphaea* there will be no *buts*! There will be time for many things soon enough, but right now forgive my bluntness but you are presently an *absolute wreck*! You will be going to the bath so we can at least *begin* to sort you out and that is *final*."

She either didn't notice, or care, when the recipient of the rather loaded address stiffened up in place. Along with everyone else in the room that stopped to openly stare at Ryuko as her ears tinged red from a pulse in her hair. She simply declared the dust, blood-soaked rags, and general dishevelment, "Utterly and

completely unacceptable." Against any and all of the eventual choked protests Ryuko could produce the towel was used to wipe her feet, she was carefully shoved along into the house proper, and marched around a corner out of sight after trying to look back and catching Satsuki's wide eyes. *M-... Matoi Von Aphaea?* Leaving the four to stand there in a silence broken by an avalanche of pages turning as Houka flipped faster through the book in his hands.

"Dog?"

"Presently occupied Snake. *Please hold on until-*"

"Dog! Von? VON!? Nobody *nobiliary particles* a countryside witch plucked from *bumble-fuck nowhere!*"

"*I'm working on it I swear!*"

The woman returned shortly though nipping hushed discussion in the bud. She urged them out of their dirty boots, directed them where to shed their varied packs for now, and patiently waited expectantly with her hands clasped together until they fully disarmed themselves as well. All the while she studied them to pick out every spot, stain, and detail visible with an unnervingly keen eye despite never dropping a pleasant demeanor. One that lingered somewhat on their insignia, and their own remnants from the recent fighting still yet to be sorted with the faintest traces of a frown.

When finally satisfied she motioned them to follow forward into the house proper up to a wide doorway to the left directly across from the stairs, and invited them to make themselves comfortable in a surprisingly proper sitting room of rich burgundy tones. Their offered seats were three sofas situated around a low table edged in complicated wooden knots. Which collectively sat on a soft rug recognizable as import from far west, and arranged to face a large stone fireplace partially set into the right-hand wall from the room's lone entrance.

The prominent installation was flanked by glass door cabinets full of ceramics and silverware partially wrapped in linens. Other shelves further around loaded with handfuls of leather tomes, lifelike wood carvings of animals, and occasional fully rigged model ship free of dust and eight-legged crewmen. Otherwise any available space from floor to heavy ceiling beams was occupied by a vast multitude of unstrung exotic bows, and arrows to match, from around the world. Windows to that outside world bore delicate lace curtains, and heavier drapes full of complimentary needlework that matched the rug to make what must be a custom set for the place.

The woman politely asked them to wait another moment before she left the room, stopped by the stairs to yell up for a *Tsumugu* to come down *immediately*, and disappeared leaving the group once

again alone in their unexpected surroundings.

Satsuki very slowly sat down in the first seat available as she attempted to fully register everything they were learning.

Milady? Lady. Lady Ryuko Matoi... von Aphaea? Matoi of Aphaea. The... The short lived northern kingdom I believe?

The structure of the name was from an old western dialect. One of many that pre-dated *Common*, but still survived about the world in regional pockets of descendants. She knew a few words in it. Just enough to handle greetings really. A daughter of *the* golden throne had to know such things of course, even if she had never used them since, on the remote possibility of actually needing to someday. The *full name* was mostly Eastern though much like their own which was unsurprising given what Ryuko had evidently let them know. She wasn't naive enough to think Ryuko *hadn't* potentially kept a surname to herself for any number of reasons. Much like she had been doing herself on this journey among others.

But as Nonon had put forth *in less than delicate words* the very last thing Satsuki had ever expected to hear was the rest *attached* to it.

That and more was what set her eyes squarely on a place of honor above the fireplace mantle to her right after giving the space a once over. The singular space was conspicuously void of lived-in adornment unlike every other corner of the room. All that rested there on a simple mount covered in black cloth was a lightly gilded cavalry saber which had seen significantly better days. It had suffered through fire at some point in its life which left its long steel blade blackened and cracked in bolts of tarnish. Its very much functional minded grip and guard littered with hints of gold left dull from impacts and lack of general maintenance.

It was the sword of one who sat in a military commander's saddle charging on the front line.

Not lavish court banquet tables nor a well to do merchant's store.

And especially not in a mage's study, however lauded they may be.

Ryuko was demonstrably well educated in a variety of fields, she was fully capable of actually carrying herself *properly* in those very few instances thus far she had chosen to do so, and was from the presence of a Nanny alone well cared for as a child.

Literal silver spoons and all.

Her first impressions of the woman came back to her quickly enough after having already reviewed them just minutes ago.

Skin unmarked by hostile woods. Hands too soft to be a person of

the land... A noblewoman lost?

It would be impossible. Utterly and completely impossible for someone of Fair blood to be nobility in this day and age. *Whatever the literal color may be.* Yet, at the same time the woman's very existence was supposed to have been impossible. Purportedly.

Matoi Ryuko... Who are you?

When a constant page flipping stopped she turned her attentions across the table in search of possible answers. Anything that could satisfactorily mesh what they had learned thus far at least. She found Houka still bent forward staring at his book. His voice low as he quickly mumbled *the name* under his breath, and repeated it in any inflection he could think of in search of some deviation that could be interpreted differently. He snapped out of it when she called his name.

He took a final glance at open pages, slapped them closed, and casually tossed the book aside so he could run shaking hands through his hair. For as long as they had known the man he had never willingly abandoned his notes. Let alone so carelessly. With a deep breath he tried to settle his composure to answer as calmly as he could manage.

"Ma'am?"

"I take it you have some insight into the surroundings we presently find ourselves within? And perhaps more importantly on a certain... *individual?*"

He eventually leaned forward once more to rest his elbows on his knees.

"She claimed to be cause of a catastrophe here ma'am."

"She claimed to be *well known*. Am I correct in thinking you have some idea on just *how well?*"

Nervously he fingered the fabric around his neck.

"*Perhaps.* Again, I do not wish to jump to conclusions so I am afraid until such time as I can be sure enough on them I do not wish to spread them as fact. What we know with certainty is what *Harime* has done given the physical evidence both parties confirmed knowledge of. She admitted to doing the deed. Which means on some level that which we have been told has to be true. So from the bottom well known enough to attract the personal *attentions* of someone who would have needed *quite* the reason, or reasons, to travel far outside Imperial lands."

"And so far away from her *master.*"

"Indeed. Beyond *that I...* Do you recall those papers you asked me to dig up and have lugged around to transcribe for my notes?"

"The information about random local events was passably intriguing to mull over campfires, but not directly useful at the time in unraveling the mystery of a specific local legend."

"So I thought *at the time*. My Lady, it is with the utmost sincerity that I regret to inform you that I did not properly carry out my orders to a satisfactory degree."

"How so?"

"In my gradual reports on their contents I glossed over anything I considered unimportant given the task before us. Details of perceived insignificance, and otherwise outside the immediate scope of the designated focus. One witch. *However*, I did record them in full for my own records just to be thorough. Thankfully. At the very least ensure what information there was to be had was properly copied for posterity before the paper could degrade further in time. *Or just lost when Uzu started pinching bits of them for kindling like a savage!*"

The man in question had taken a few moments to regard the more militant furnishings with some fascination, before dropping into a seat beside Nonon that directly faced the fireplace to stretch out comfortably. Who in response curled up to get as far away from him, and as close to the end of the couch closest to Satsuki's, as possible.

"Nobody was complaining then about having warm food and reading light. *Damn*, this is a nice seat."

"We have--"

Satsuki cut in to stop them before it could devolve into an argument.

"More important matters at hand. *What* has become *significant* Houka?"

"A particularly rare name that I don't think I've ever come across before digging into any of the materials for our present mission. One which I could dare say is *unique* then with some confidence even without our present geographic location factored in. *Which* we can only assume would make it even more so given the northlands were mostly settled by westerners as the crusades marched East, but I digress."

"Her's?"

"And *that's* where things get a bit, shall we say, *extraordinary*?"

Impossible to believe? Absurdly fascinating? Rather complicating unfortunately anyway one cuts it if nothing else. For it was not *her's.*"

"The obituary for an enchanter of some evidently very well to do means?"

Once again he adjusted the fabric about his neck as he was oft to do when particularly nervous, and shook his head which made Satsuki raise a brow.

"Surprisingly, no. Or rather, *partially I suppose?* It was less an obituary and more a... *general sweeping headline?* But not for an *enchanter.*"

"We were told his trade, and established there is little possibility for that to have been a lie given what he has purportedly made. Surely there must have been notice of a public figure of such skill passing suddenly even if the details on why were not public? I can't imagine the market for clandestine enchanting to be massive enough to support such a standard of living out here. People must have known of his work in the region."

"*That* is the logical assumption yes. One which I shared. It puzzled me as well after she mentioned it as I tried checking for a matching death notice, but for someone so skilled there was oddly enough absolutely *nothing* anywhere. The next usual assumption from there would be that we had been lied to, but the evidence of his life even with however little we have seen is... indisputable. The addition of a *name* though... *That*, that changes things. *Dramatically, potentially.* But how do we reconcile these details? After thinking on it one realizes that a *trade* is not necessarily a *job*. Per definition it also covers what I assume she actually meant, but was maybe unable to articulate in her occasionally broken *Common?* Perhaps. Simply *an area of expertise.*"

"Houka are you *suggesting* that an enchanter more capable than anyone else I have ever heard of, and spearheaded what might be the single most obscure school of magic study possible, was just a man pursuing a *hobby?*"

"Oh no. *No*, I wouldn't go that far. Not without substantially more information about his body of work to go on, *but* speaking as a student of one of the most prestigious schools devoted to related work in our end of the world I can say the man was definitely more than *just an enchanter.*"

With a tilt of his head he drew the room's attention toward the mounted sword.

"How much more?"

"For now all I am comfortable confirming is that our *new addition to the cause* isn't just *Black* blooded ma'am... *She's blue blooded.*"

Which was where Nonon stopped holding her tongue in anticipation of anything making sense.

"*Hold it!* Stop the carriage! Back it up Dog. From the *start* there is *no way*. Like I know things have gotten a little *strange* out here, but this time there is literally *no physically possible way* that she or he could be-... On top of *everything fucking else* going on with her are you *seriously* trying to tell us that she is straight up, *honest to gods, nobility!?*"

"I admit this is based on limited connections, but considering the pieces we have-"

"*Pieces my ASS!* How *the fuck* would he have ever been raised to station!? Without an existing mandate from heaven conferred to a crown to do it only bishops could have, and completely forgetting that the Church of Aura apparently had some hand in *stabbing him to death*, I don't see how *any* of the Orders of The Divines wouldn't be able to tell if-... *You know*. I'm not saying he *couldn't* have passed for human if he was-... He could probably have been a bit-... But..." Struggling for words without resorting to slurs Nonon reached up over her ears, and motioned out a certain long pair to get her point across. "If *his* were anything like *hers*, then I think we can all agree that it would be a *tad* noticeable. And there's a sword, probably his I know we're all thinking it, so *especially* during a *bloody knighting* in a *cathedral!*"

"Per her own admission he was only half-blood like any others you, or I, have seen elsewhere. *Vestigial* traits from Fair descendants at most compared to *her*... *Physical presence?* And if her ability with white magic is any indication of *his* knowledge as her teacher, it's entirely within reason that he could have turned ear cutting scars into something more subtle. And with such purported skill, *that likely commanded a monetary compensation able to afford everything around us*, even you must admit he would have been recognized for his efforts. Though I will say its more likely he was born into it based on what I have-"

"There's *more!*? Dog just what the hell are you not telling us!?"

"That which would be very dangerous to *assume*. Patience."

"Dog!"

"Calm yourselves. Houka while I wouldn't put it as such, Nonon has a point. Just what in the world have we walked into that you are being *this* cautious with it?"

"International politics, ma'am."

"*Politics?*"

The topic was dropped once again when the woman returned carrying a silver tray loaded with fine goblets and a pitcher of water. Both of which she deposited on the table for them. With things that needed to be rushed on account of changing plans at least temporarily satisfied she finally gave them her undivided attention, but even through an almost professional greeting inviting them to have a drink a new hesitation was noticeable in her voice. She was unsure how to address them. Especially when she turned directly to Satsuki.

"I have been informed that you are all to stay for an indeterminate length of time. Is this correct?"

Satsuki was aware enough to respond politely in kind. She had thought of telling Ryuko at some point *not* to identify them to a complete extent if the need arose, but hadn't had the opportunity to ask before they suddenly found themselves among the present company. It was possible she had already informed the woman, and contradicting any such statements could only sour relations. The potential *realities of Ryuko's life* would have to wait until she could confront her in person.

"I must apologize for imposing on you like this so suddenly. It would be completely understandable if you refuse to have us. In such case just allowing us to set up camp at the far end of the field would be more than sufficient for our needs at this time."

"*Oh heavens no*, I just wanted confirmation. Forcing someone to pitch shelter outdoors in general isn't really proper. To do that to you while a guest of my Lady's though will not do in the slightest... *Kaiserliche prinzeßin*. Honestly this location was never intended to house many. There are no spare rooms for guests as would be proper or-, *let alone anything remotely adequate for such a prominent visitor*, but I am sure we can figure something out to get everyone situated as appropriately as possible."

Imperial Princess. That answers that at least. "No matter what is available you have our sincerest gratitude for any and all hospitality afforded, and I promise that we will do anything in our power not to be a burden *miss...*"

"Ah! *Where are my manners*. Kinagase, Lady Ryuko's steward Kinue Kinagase. I suppose I am the *former* steward technically... *But to abandon her now especially when she is in such need would be unconscionable*. On the subject of *conditions* though I don't wish to be rude in my assumptions, but you all look to have been on quite the voyage and are in need of sorting out to achieve a semblance of norm as well. Regretfully we have but one bath so I beg patience for the time being. Until available all I can offer

is some spare clothes if you require."

Satsuki glanced across the table to the far couch to find Houka once again nose deep into his book making notes.

Ryuko told her who I am, but didn't tell her about the battle?

"Again you are too kind, and we may take you up on that. But if I may ask something?"

"By all means."

"You accredit our state to a rough voyage?"

"I have heard some galleons limped into harbor yesterday. I assumed you arrived with them given the distance from the Imperial Middle Kingdom, and that you all took your wounds aboard. I have not seen them or the bodies that were unloaded myself but I heard it was especially horrific this time... *Such a waste of life.*"

"A ship was involved in our delivery yes, but it was not flying an Imperial flag or even to the harbor actually. We were planning on making the return trip south aboard such vessels though at some point in the future. So forgive my ignorance, but I must ask what exactly happened to them? Were they victims of poor seas from the storm that blew over last night?"

"Really? Well, that would not be a wise choice at present truthfully. Poor *scoundrels* looking to be rich by any means necessary is what it was, and undoubtedly will still be for the foreseeable future."

Satsuki gave a second glance toward Nonon, who managed to stop glaring at Uzu *for trying to eye Kinue's back*, long enough to try and remember if she'd heard anything of the sort before. She shrugged and shook her head after drawing a blank though, leaving Satsuki to ask directly.

"Someone is actually *attacking* Imperial flagged vessels?"

"Have been for months alongside anything else trying to go in or out of the bay that so much as *might* be carrying anything remotely valuable. It's been making things rough again. *Bloody pirates...* But, if you *didn't* then, how *did* you make it here with her? And *what...* *What happened to all of you?*"

"*That* is a lengthy discussion best suited to a proper sit down with everyone present probably, and I don't want to hold you up. As to *how* in short Ryuko used magic in a retreat from our collective... *untimely demise-*" She could see lines on Kinue's forehead immediately crease with worry even with the careful wording, and cut herself off to try and ease that before it could lead to anything rash. "Please remain calm, there is no immediate threat here. We are assuredly far enough away that I feel

confident in saying that *nothing* will continue here. I don't really know how she did it specifically to be completely honest, but she brought us to the Lynnval directly if you know what that is. From there she brought us here on foot."

Kinue went quiet at that.

"Lynnval... *My word, how long has it been?*"

"You are familiar with it?"

"To a degree. I have been to the site on occasion, but that was, *goodness*, years ago now. Before things... *changed*. But even still that doesn't make any sense *unless... Unless the ring works!*"

"If I recall she did handle one if that is what you are referring to. Before her... well, hand, went almost completely limp."

"*So that's how he could have gotten her out... Hand. Right.* I need to see how she's getting on what with her injuries, and finding some suitable *actual garments* for her. *It should be upstairs. Or was it down here?* If I had more to put out for you all I would have, your--"

"Please do not go out of your way to accommodate us so. Place to rest is more than enough. Again, as much as physically possible we *won't* be a burden. Do not hesitate to ask for any assistance we may provide to make things easier. Along those lines just Satsuki is fine."

"I couldn't possibly- that would be *far* out of line."

"I must insist. I don't have the full story, but I have heard enough to know that it would be for the best. If not for my personal ease of mind, then as a matter of safety for *all* of us. We, *dare I say it*, do live in *interesting times*."

Kinue looked like she wanted to ask so many questions as she gave them all another once over, but she eventually sighed and nodded in agreement.

"You're not wrong, I suppose. Alright... Satsuki. And the rest of you? *Simple adventurers from lands south* I suppose we're going with?"

Names, what titles were among Nonon and Houka, and ranks for the trio were all given at Satsuki's insistence before Kinue took her leave. On the way she also stopped once again at the stairs to shout up for *Tsumugu*, before leaving toward the bath.

Which left Satsuki to lean back in her seat to process *another unexpected development*. Someone had the means to successfully attack Imperial shipping to a substantially disruptive degree. The

only way that could be possible was if certain military hardware had finally gotten out to the broader world, despite generations of effort to prevent exactly that for this exact reason. It would make her job significantly more difficult in the coming years even if everything else went perfectly. Why on earth this was the first she was hearing of this if it has been going on for some time was also frankly concerning. Judging by Nonon's own silent meltdown she could tell she wasn't the only one considering the long term ramifications.

Filing that *dreadfully unfortunate* bit of news away for later she looked up hearing some movement above. She twisted around in her seat to follow what became a stomp of feet down the stairs. Where a muscular man in heavy work clothes out of place among the furnishings leaned over the banister to look down the hall. His hair was close cut down both sides to leave a single row protruding from the middle, which was dyed a bright tone of red. He sounded annoyed as he yelled, and carried an unstrung bow he had been working on in his hands.

"What is it!? Something trying to break into the drying shed again--"

When he noticed there were people staring at him he quickly looked around to find four strangers about the sitting room, and sacks of gear deposited in neat piles beside the front door. All sported Imperial insignia, and the faint remnants of recent blood. He vaulted over the banister, gripped the bow like a quarterstaff, and barked questions at them.

"What the hell is going on here!? Who are you people and what have you done with her!?"

Kinue came back in a hurry with her sleeves rolled up to answer the yells, and to dig through a trunk full of cloth in a back corner of the room.

"This isn't the fletcher's shop mind your tongue! I'm right here, I'm *fine*, and its good you're awake don't just stand there I need you to get your shoes on. Dinner plans have changed and that boar you caught yesterday will do for a proper feast befitting the occasion."

Incredulously he stared at her, then back to the four, and kept yelling.

"Sis have you lost your damn mind? They are *LITERALLY* blood soaked Imperials! *IMPERIALS!* What if they are with the Guild! Or *the fucking church!?*"

Lifting up a long red garment in her hands Kinue smiled to herself wistfully, before folding it up to carry in a bundle of its accompanying matching pieces. Walking out into the hall she

somehow managed to stare the slightly taller man down and tried to explain things quickly.

"At this point *I don't care* where they hail. *She's a... A Kiryuin* even. But it doesn't matter *Tsu*. Before you yell more I know. However, they... They brought one... one *lost little bird with a clipped wing, home, Tsu. S-She's home*. We have important guests for *milady*. As such they will be treated *appropriately*."

"*She? She's a- B-But-... What? WHAT!?*"

Once again disappearing instead of elaborating further he was left looking after her like she really had gone crazy. Regardless he was not letting this nonsense go on as it was, at least until he could figure out what was actually going on. When Satsuki left her seat to meet him in the doorway he eyed her warily. From stance alone she could see he was ready for things to come to blows.

"It is a pleasure to--"

"Kiryuin? As in *THE* Kiryuins? Young. Armed... *Die Prinzessin aus stahl, I presume?*"

"I take it news of my exploits have gotten around, and you have heard of me."

"In the flesh?"

"I am the one and only same. Now, if we could just sit down and talk--"

"With who!?"

"Just a small personal retinue of my knights collectively traveling without fanfare. Nothing more. I take it you are Tsumu--"

She took a step back with a twist to avoid a swing of the bow that just missed the side of her head. Strands of her hair flew wildly as it sailed passed and into the door frame where it stopped with a resounding crack. Uzu immediately jumped over the back of his sofa and looked for anything he could use as a weapon, but Satsuki signaled him to stop even as she took up a more defensible stance on her feet between the man and her knights.

"You have the nerve to show your face *here!?*" Tsumugu spit the words at her feet. "THE NERVE TO STAND IN THESE HALLS AFTER WHAT YOUR PEOPLE HAVE DONE!?" His voice otherwise rattling the walls with a strain pushing passed deep pains.

"Hold! We come in peace good sir!"

"BULLSHIT! *There are two things you need to know woman. One, I don't care* how many niceties you say I'm not buying *any* of it. And

two, I have *absolutely* no fucking reason *whatsoever* to even let you breath!"

"I can assure you there is no nefarious purpose behind us."

"*Oh, really!? Where have I heard that one before I wonder. Take a guess.*"

Raising the make shift staff again he was preparing for another strike.

"We will not bring any harm to this house! I don't know the full depth of what happened, but those responsible for any and all prior conflict are *assuredly* at odds with myself! And it is with the deepest sincerity that I regret there was nothing I could have done to have stopped it had I been aware of it transpiring at the time!"

She could see the muscles in his hands twitch as he gripped the wooden implement in his hands. Watched his eyes flick between the others behind her still in the room, which she once again motioned back to stand down if they were getting up as well. Because he was not going for a second swing.

"*You... What?*"

"I've been learning on my way here. Enough to know why you may very well be justified to hold onto such anger at those responsible. From what I grasp it happened when I was young. Too young to have a say if I had been informed of it at all though. And it was possibly before such a say from my family could have even existed in truth. Not that it matters now. Evidently I might know too much. I don't know if it was that which set her off or otherwise the conflict which has simmered between us for years. The person who's admitted to the deed tried to have me killed three days ago. The blood and damage you see is from our escape."

They stared at each other as she let him think her responses over. Eventually Tsumugu slowly lowered his weapon. The volume left his voice, but not its edge.

"And I should believe any of this why? Better yet, why are you even *here* of all places to begin with?"

"We were brought here in search of safe haven."

"Who on earth would bring you of all people here?"

As if in answer a shout drew both their attentions toward that corner behind the stairs.

"*Milady please, your hair is still wet!*"

Ryuko rushed out from around it sliding sideways on white socks, with *most* of a long sleeved red dress flapping about her limbs. She stumbled multiple times on the fabric stretching to the floor as she ran up to give him a one armed hug. Her right arm now tied up in a clean sling over top the fancy gown's plunging front lacing. Red crisscrossing strings keeping her chest modest as the layers that should have been in there as well were missing. She shouted out as the wood dropped from his grasp.

"Uncle Mohawk!"

"K-K... Kronprinzessin!?"

In the silence after the bow stilled he carefully put an arm around the young woman now as tall as his shoulder to hold on to her. He scanned across her damp, still wild, hair and its unique glowing red fringes. He had only ever known, or even *heard of*, one such individual in his lifetime. It was impossible. Yet here she was. No longer an intensely curious little girl yet to grow into her long pointed ears, and presently injured, but very much *alive*. Only when another yell came from down the hall did she squirm to escape his grasp and got around behind him.

"Milady come back!"

From the same corner Kinue appeared carrying a towel and comb. Ryuko buried her face in his shirt and put her feet behind his legs. A position used to hide from one *infernal silver torture device* as she had called it so many years ago.

"You have knots in your hair that need to be dealt with while it is wet!"

"But Nannaaa!"

When Kinue attempted to go around the dumbfounded man Ryuko ducked away from the hair care tool, and led a lap around him before she reluctantly broke for the first available escape route. Unfortunately that was the doorway to the sitting room, and still standing there a few feet back from the middle of it was Satsuki.

Who still stood there in a state of shock with the choked word ringing in her ears.

Kron-... Kronprinzessin?

C-Crown Princess?

CROWN PRINCESS!?

In the split second before direct impact could occur Ryuko tried to throw her weight to one side to twist passed. Under normal circumstances she would have easily made such a maneuver. With her

right arm bound up though, and only a single slippery step off her left foot to propel her forward at speed, it was immediately apparent that it was not going to be enough to clear the standing obstacle. Her eyes crunched up, she grit her teeth, and prepared for a world of pain set to erupt from all her bruises being agitated again by this little blunder.

In that same fraction of a second though Satsuki just managed to realize what was about to happen. She didn't attempt to sidestep. Maybe if she had noticed sooner there would have been time to do so. Maybe there would have been time to debate her options. She was left with only the fastest reaction left to try; *muscle memory*.

She planted her weight, slightly swept her left foot back across the wood, and moved as if to draw her blade for a horizontal swing. Except instead of grasping for a nonexistent sword she loosely caught the body hurtling toward her side. She managed to take hold of Ryuko's waist in her left arm, the woman's good arm by the wrist with her right for what stability could be had, and pivoted on her own left foot to burn the forward momentum through a combined rotational movement.

Satsuki settled her grasp on Ryuko as they completed their first spin in place on her heel, and transitioned into a quick circular step centered on herself so the energy would be spent safely in those fractions of seconds that ended up feeling like *minutes*.

Princess. A princess. A Fae. Crown Princess... Ryuko Matoi of Aphaea?

She watched Ryuko's face shift from a bracing grimace into confusion from a missing drop to the floor that was supposed to have happened by then.

It- She- Its not-

Through the second rotation she watched as both glowing eyes cracked open warily for a pair of ever so slightly distinguishable blue pupils to dart about, before they focused down on her from the exceptionally close distance away.

She smelled of wildflowers. Small traces of worry and uncertainty lingering about the sharp features of her face, and the faintest red bloom of a blush which took hold there. Was it from the proximity, or the words let loose into the open air, was impossible to say. Satsuki could only *imagine* what shock was on her own face.

Into the third and final turn Satsuki carried her close until they came to a complete natural stop, let her down to her own feet, and left the hand on her lower back keeping their bodies pushed together. Their free hands outstretched to one side left them

standing like a dancing pair coming to a rest. That became a long pause as it seemed both of them were stuck on deciding how to proceed.

Was it true then? Houka had hinted at something that could be significant... Politically.

Had she entered into a contract with what would be the representative of a foreign crown? Satsuki eventually cleared her throat and spoke in the most polite way she could. There was only ever going to be one way to know for sure, and a feeling of anxiety deep in her chest felt like it would doom her heart to try and suppress.

"It was entirely my fault for being in a doorway at an inconvenient time necessitating action to avoid further distress. Forgive me. Have you been hurt, *Princess?*"

Ryuko stood there staring back unable to make her voice work. Her lips simply opened and twitched a few times before settling into a thin frown. She looked down, then at their arms, and only noted the pressure keeping her there when she swallowed before finally replying. Which while low came as the careful voice Satsuki could recognize as how Ryuko had been taught to by her *Nanny*.

"Not any more than I... already was."

Satsuki noted the slight stutter, but more importantly the complete lack of any refute to the address. Something replaced her anxiousness in that moment that took a second to place.

Nervous excitement?

Even as a child she was still in some capacity present for the official visitations of foreign dignitaries, and emissaries, granted official audience with *the queen*. Those missions had never included foreign royals though. Nor their children. *Kingdoms need their rulers actually present to rule after all*. Such travel was therefore rare in the post war world even generations on. It had to be heavily coordinated at both ends, and understandably costly with all it *usually* would have entailed.

Despite the seriousness of her own life's turns she had sometimes wondered what it would be like to actually meet a *peer*. Not like Nonon, or even Houka, or other children from the old district. A *true peer*. Little girls not in her shoes often dreamed of being a princess. She had dreamed of *meeting them*. Of banquets and silly bards. Of sneaking away to get into the usual mischief of childhood not afforded to those in her position bound by decorum. Or mission otherwise.

Without actively trying to, or realizing it, she evidently finally *had*.

And it was of all people a *Fae princess mage of the wild north*?

She had not the faintest idea what question to ask first. She eased up and let Ryuko take a half step backward from the embrace though so she could check what had happened to that bad arm in the crush. Then realized she was also staring straight down into Ryuko's dress, and hastily returned her attention back up to find the blush had intensified noticeably alongside a curious narrowing of eyes. She released Ryuko's waist and brought in the arm to give the flowing red sleeve material decorated with silver lines an appreciative once over, before finally letting her have it back to grasp over the other.

"Forgive me, but I think I agree with Miss Kinue. *This*, even while incomplete does you far more... *justice*, than some scraps ever could. *Matoi*."

Ryuko once again failed to make a noise when her lips parted, but took the complement without delving into anything potentially crossing her mind. At least until her eyes crossed over from Satsuki to what was beyond her. Before returning to the floor with grit teeth.

"I... *Just don't... don't call me that... Please.*"

"Is it not your name?"

She almost took her question back as Ryuko seemed to physically recoil from it.

"*Not anymore.*"

That only raised more eyebrows around the room full of speechless knights full of their own questions yet to be raised. However, a footstep brought the pair's attention back to the room around, and to a flash of silver approaching once again. Bad arm held tight Ryuko bolted to vault over the first sofa facing away from the door, did so with enough power to fly high over the table where she tucked her knees in to roll sideways to get more clearance, and went over Houka who managed to duck in time as she sailed down behind the back of the second sofa into cover. Leaving behind a number of bewildered individuals staring after her, Kinue shaking her head with a sigh, and Satsuki to realize that a certain burnt sword had been what Ryuko likely noticed.

"*Thirteen years and still-* Go Tsumugu. I'll *wrangle* things together here."

Despite all his yelling the man went to pick up the bow, but did not attempt to strike at Satsuki again. He simply looked at her, before looking back to Kinue.

"You're sure? About being alone with... with these--"

Pushing the comb and towel into Satsuki's grasp, Kinue went back into the hall to take the unstrung bow from his loose grasp and used it to tactically *wack* the towering man into a crumpled heap on the floor. She held him in a choke-hold of wood on windpipe until he slapped the dark surface to concede defeat. Point made and bow deposited on a table for later she stepped over his gasping body, took the hair supplies back with an apology for forcing them upon Satsuki, and once again went into the sitting room after her *charge*.

"Milady can we *please* just get this over with?"

Back on his feet and rubbing sore spots Tsumugu looked at the assembled once again, and a slowly rising pout from behind the far couch, before he made his way over to the front door and slipped on his boots as asked.

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Dinner was relatively simple given what was available to feed seven people on short notice, but was ready in short enough order thanks to the technically not ordered *volunteering* of certain individuals in an effort to be *useful*. The dining room itself well put together much like the rest of the building turned out to be, and the grand table in its center just big enough to give everyone a comfortable place to break bread.

"Archaeological research? You've picked up your father's studies then?"

And once the plates had been cleared offer explanation for how and why they had arrived.

Ryuko nodded at Kinue's question, but otherwise just looked back down at that table she was sitting at the head of. Spurred on by the odd request to *deny her name* Satsuki had been surreptitiously studying her for the better part of the evening. Her mood had picked up with the introduction of food, which was *enthusiastically* devoured as quickly as she could with just a single hand for silverware, but as soon as she was out of meat to tear apart between her teeth the distraction was gone. And it was back to just silently sullenly existing as conversation more or less went on around her.

Either spacing out, or intentionally avoiding engaging in the conversation. Another fit? Or simple mental wandering? Or...

It was not a pleasant tale, and she had fully expected at least one of the Kinagases to have some outburst over what horrors their apparent *charge* had been subjected to. To their credit while the sister's face did fall into a deep frown, they had held their questions all the way to the end. Once caught up to speed Houka asked them in turn for an account of the collapse in an effort to better understand what happened here. Tsumugu took it upon himself to *obliged* them as Kinue fell silent wringing her hands, with so *much more*. What he had seen and heard as the former *head game keeper* to the estate. About the greatest *man* he had ever known.

The man whom Houka had found in the papers.

The King of the northern kingdom of *Aphaea*.

König Isshin Matoi von Aphaea.

Tsumugu told them of the grand winter campaigns of cavalry cutting through the snow across the countryside to attack when least expected. Of ships that could navigate the sea without fail in any conditions imaginable. Of an army that was as close as any brotherhood. But he made it absolutely clear that *Lord Isshin* was no ruthless conqueror steeped in the blood of his enemies. Isshin was no simple warlord. Just a single father tragically left to stand alone with a child he wished nothing more than to build a safer future for.

Kronprinzessin Ryuko Matoi von Aphaea.

But to various peoples of the north the man had otherwise been known as a *savior*.

The first order of business whenever a territory was taken was not to ransack, nor the building of forts or camps, but to shore up any and all roads, wells, and other critical local infrastructure. Diplomatic missions were sent year round to convince individual territories to join voluntarily primarily. Bureaucratic districts were formed, and put under the immediate jurisdiction of his most trusted generals, to ensure any smaller grievances or disturbances could be immediately addressed without waiting for orders from the capital of Munze. Bandit groups were either put to the sword, or disbanded with full amnesty if they agreed to join up for honest *supervised* work. Work which was in part more available than ever before because of a complete ban and outlawing of slavery anywhere in the kingdom as a *vile and immoral practice*.

Crime plummeted, trade vastly expanded down from isolated coastal ports along the northern sea routes from east to west, south across the land all the way to the dragon's teeth mountains proper, and even beyond them in a more limited capacity. Bloody oppressive regimes encounter in the way toppled one after another.

The Order had been around as it was everywhere in the East, but

Aphaea was the first true stability since the Crusading Union Army from The Commonwealth had left for their own homeland back west. A new golden age of safety, security, and prosperity in the eyes of the public had been born under his watch. A start to greater things as diplomats from all over the north came seeking audiences with the *Wolf of Aphaea*, who was said to have lost an eye but gained wisdom beyond sight.

An official coronation of the last son of an *old* noble house ordained by the gods to shepherd the people as Aura intended.

But even after everything he had done in a *staggeringly* short amount of time, when the sun rose on an early winter morning about thirteen years ago none of it mattered. When a young girl had saved another from drowning in the bay by shedding her own blood *it hadn't mattered*. The same *Order* which had been content to sit back and let mankind suffer for *generations* as *the will of the gods* finally stepped in.

All because of the color of that blood when it ran and wasn't diluted by seawater.

When the angry mob bearing torches and improvised weapons reached the gates Isshin had ordered his garrisoned troops not to harm them. He thought they might be reasoned with when the raving panic finally subsided, and set his mind to go out to them in person to make his case at that time.

He never got the chance.

By the second morning the castle was engulfed in flames, and rocked by explosions as a small fleet of black ships forced their way into the harbor. By the end of the month every surviving district garrison had been overrun by either the Inquisition itself tearing apart the countryside in search of *gods knows what*, or by formerly suppressed local warlords who took the chaos as an opportunity to regain their power by force. Justified by *the will of Aura*.

Isshin had never allowed the raising of taxes just to build more castles without reason, instead opting for a smaller significantly more mobile army. Unfortunately such an army had stood little chance against full blown sieges.

Those who survived surmised the ships had to have been somewhere close by to get in so soon though, and someone must have infiltrated the keep to have planted all those explosives beforehand. Someone, somewhere, had planned the whole debacle. A mission just waiting for the first *legal* opportunity to storm in and do what they had been sent to.

And *that* was why he did not trust Imperials.

They hadn't had any concrete proof of the theory aside from the fact that the same army just left as quickly as they had arrived when they were finished, but the damage had been done all the same. With that story from Ironwood though a reason was finally available.

"The enchanting from a youth spent researching his roots... Was that *really it*? So many dead. So many friends. Family... Aikuro... *For some experiments and papers?*"

He sighed heavily after finishing his drink.

On the depressing note Tsumugu got up to retrieve a bottle of the hardest amber liquor they had to pour into his mug. The silence left Satsuki with her observations from throughout. Multiple times Ryuko's usable hand had twitched into the start of a motion to a hood she didn't have, but caught each time before it was too obvious. By the end of Tsumugu's recounting her same hand found its way onto her neck though. Twice her subconscious betrayed her and she rubbed the base of an ear. It could have been a natural reaction to an itch, but both times the corners of her mouth twitched her small frown deeper. And Satsuki realized what was ailing her.

Guilt.

Ryuko could not have known what plots had been laid out around her father's neck. Indeed neither Kinagase held her to any level of blame, *but to lose him after accidentally triggering one?* And no mother. That alone seemed to be a topic Tsumugu had been most unwilling to even acknowledge. *And* she hadn't known if the Kinagase's had survived either. Effectively every person she had ever known had been killed because, at least on the surface, there was no amount of good deed that could ever wipe away the *sin* of not being *Human*. Literally shedding blood for mankind hadn't been enough.

The insistence on not wishing to help *humans* would have only been natural.

Satsuki wanted to offer words. Say *something* that could help in a way she herself somewhat wished someone could have done for her when her own father had been so similarly *ended*. It hurt not knowing what could possibly be said though. Ryuko had the knife already, she had learned who had actually done it already, and was obviously intending on carrying through with what she'd started with Harime.

Satsuki hadn't been the only one watching though. Kinue had been trying to keep a corner of an eye always toward Ryuko, and while keeping stock of the room overall had caught Satsuki's study. She motioned a finger toward Satsuki's glass mug and started to get up to grab a pitcher. Hint, or *order*, taken the remaining third was

drained and she nodded as the woman came over to refill it by leaning in from behind.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes. It's just that some of this has reminded me of... home. Sadly."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. I'm, rather sure of it... Thank you for noticing even before I knew it."

Kinue nodded as she pulled away and put things back. But she didn't return to her seat. Instead she went around behind Ryuko's chair and lightly set hands down on her shoulders. Taking another sip Satsuki cleared her throat.

"I understand that this is honestly dreadful to hear, but I couldn't help but notice that something is weighing heavily upon your mind. Kronprinzessin."

The startled shudder was slight, but she didn't miss it. Lit from above by another magic chandelier blue eyes came up to meet her. Functioning hand supporting her chin.

"I told you I'm just me."

Faces looked back and forth while Houka set about taking down more notes.

"That, I do not fully understand. Why insist on this now? Earlier made sense, I've been doing the exact same myself to avoid undue attention. But now when in some level of privacy? Are you not proud of what your family accomplished here? Becoming a king of Men while any fraction Elven is no small feat. Even if not openly so, mere suspicions could undermine much authority among the more inconsiderate masses. And frankly the more I hear the more I think this was a good man more than deserving of such a place, if not a great man, and it is the highest disappointment I never got to meet him."

Unfortunately that may have been a poor choice of words as she noted another wince that came before a soft admission.

"Because I Don't deserve it."

Which forced Kinue to cut in.

"Milady its your name! Your house! Your kingdom--"

"The house is dead and there is no kingdom!" Silence returned with a vengeance after Ryuko's shout. She quietly apologized to Nanna

for actually yelling back, but kept going. "There is no kingdom anymore. No crown, no estate, no land, no respect, *no point*. There's only hate, hate and a thirst for my blood. Yeah, *princess of Aphaea*! Except Aphaea is no more. Dad built it, and I destroyed it. That *inquisition* only got away with all they did because I made that mess."

"But no one could have ever known especially in your position--"

"Does it matter what I did or did not know!? Everyone, and everything, is *gone* either way."

"Ryu... I suppose now is as good a time as any to ask how much you personally know about what happened *after... Fleeing?*"

Confused she looked back over her shoulder for an explanation of where this was going, and shook her head no.

"When the fires burned out yes all the troops who'd come just sort of *left*. The church remains around, but not based out of Munze anymore. There was fighting for who would take over what for *months* in the void the whole ordeal left behind. But, at least in this area, I know for a fact that most people hated the upheaval and wished to go back to the way things were before the riots. They realized that going after your father had been *utterly foolish...* To cut a long story short technically all is not actually lost. The kingdom still exists, as does your title. Do you remember Mister Maynor?"

"Uh..."

"The appointed mine overseer. Short fellow with blonde hair. Really liked to yell after having a drink, or twelve."

"Vaguely?"

"He was the one who eventually capitalized on that public sentiment. He'd managed to keep his personal enforcers alive by keeping their heads down out in the mines, and only left the hills to meet The Merchants guild dug into the market district after the Inquisitors had gone. They formed an alliance to restore the peace under the new city-state of *Drachma* that stands today."

"They used another Elven name?"

"Just as your father had himself, *on purpose*. The new Governor had troops to reform a fraction of the military and seized former state assets as required, but anything deemed useless was left to *the old Estate*. The Guild rebuilt the bureaucracy, though with much more power for themselves than before. Together they even managed to establish official relations with the traders to bring them back again. All on the promise of bringing back some fraction of what once was. The *hunt* for former staff and aides by the

church was not continued. The old cathedral was turned over to private owners in fact as it otherwise lay abandoned by the clergy who left... Invaders had come, but they'd never actually got around to revoking the mandate. If you came out publicly as alive to claim it I am fairly sure things might not go badly. Maynor won't want to give up his power anytime soon of course, but he does not have the martial might to ignore public will. He'd have to recognize your name in some capacity. If nothing else formally claiming possession of the estate would secure the remaining fifty-odd acres of woodland and the old castle grounds against further seizing. And so long as there are people who haven't sworn away their allegiance there are also technically still subjects under the domain... *Two for sure at least...* I know it isn't much, but its a start-

Ryuko pushed her chair back some to get up and cut her off with raspy words. "A start!? **Even if...** Even if the *witch hunt* is over, and people regret trying to *burn me at the stake*, I'm sorry Nanna but that ship has *sailed*. I'm not putting an army together to collect a birthright from Governor *whats-his-face*, or anyone else for that matter. As far as I'm concerned that all went up in smoke the day the grounds got turned into an *exploding bonfire over my head!* A *princess of fifty acres of nothing but woods and a mass grave...* I'm just me, and *that's fucking complicated enough as it is.*" And before Kinue could even comment on the swear Ryuko had left for her room while clutching her worn throat. Leaving dinner officially over.

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As the evening gave way to moonlight the general mood hadn't lifted much, and in light of this everyone ended up turning in early for the night. Tsumugu took both young men to his room and cleared floor space for them to lay out their bedrolls on top of some towels and tarps so he could keep an eye on them, Nonon got a spare cot with Kinue at the latter's insistence on sticking to some level of decorum, which left the room at the end of the second floor the place where the only other available spare cot was set up for Satsuki. Ryuko's room.

It was there in the dark she was awoken by a muffled noise. Rolling over from facing the wall she cracked an eye open to spy an empty bed though. Covers kicked down and occupant missing.

Waking up she sat up fully to look around and found Ryuko standing in front of a desk set under the room's lone window directly across from the doorway. Her arm was braced against the furniture for support as tiny flashes of red sparked about her hair in time with gasping breaths. The outline of her body visible through the borrowed white slip she wore thanks to a strange soft white light

coming occasionally from the window. Getting out of bed Satsuki fixed her own identical night dress and went over to see what was going on. Ryuko got the first word in.

"Light sleeper, Eyebrows?"

"Very. I take it you were unfortunately afflicted by another fit?"

She didn't get a confirmation, but also not a disagreement. Standing there she also noticed rivulets of sweat were running down Ryuko's arm as she reached to undo a latch for the window. Left and then right she pushed the large square frames outward to let a summer breeze blow in. Its wind rustling the red dress hung up on a closet door, blowing the thin fabric around both of them, and also carrying thin streams of familiar twinkling white lights.

"You can go back to sleep."

"Are you not?"

At that another wave struck Ryuko. She gripped at her forehead as Satsuki got hold of her to stop her from falling over. When it passed Ryuko shoved her to let go and sat on the desk to pant for air.

"Getting... worse... Forcing themselves... in."

"Maybe there's a reason?"

"There's no reason, its just--"

"You're not mad."

"And how do you know!?"

Staring up at her Satsuki was going to refute it, but felt a lump in her throat when she realized Ryuko was openly crying. Tears welled up along the bottom of glowing eyes to scatter their light before rolling down in beads. The woman had taken the pain of her arm being split to the joint far better than she was fairing now under the strain within her mind.

"Believe me when I say I have known people far less stable, and far more self serving, than you."

"You don't understand--"

"I don't. I have not claimed to. I've honestly never encountered such a phenomenon before in my life. But I *have* encountered genuine madness. Frequently. And you have not, and are not, exhibiting any behaviors like them. So allow me to better understand them, and you... Tell me."

"What?"

"This most recent *vision* to start. Other *visions* perhaps. Don't push it from your mind this time, don't try to forget it, and don't try to come up with excuses to prevent confronting it. Focus on the... the *dream* and tell me about it. Give me details. If you can't process the information in your own mind because of the pain it causes then allow me to use mine in your stead. By your own admission I learn fast. I could tell you what I make of it, and we could go from there."

"Why the fuck would I *voluntarily* bring this bullshit on?"

"Well, right now until it passes I don't think either of us are going to get much sleep. And you must admit after everything we rather need some. So unless you have a *better* idea we might as well just let it happen and get this over with. Preferably relayed in *Common* if possible."

"You want me to *narrate my insanity*?"

"I still don't think it is--"

"*It has to be! It NEEDS to be.*"

"But why?"

Ryuko got back to her feet to once again look outside. She was fairly sure openly inviting the pain was an objectively *terrible* idea, but Kiryuin's logic was annoyingly sound. Once a vision passed it was usually some time before another could come on. There was possibly no quicker way of ensuring at least a quiet night's rest. "*Because Satsuki, if I am not... Then I'm doomed.*" In silent motions she retrieved her ruined cloak, pulled it on over her shoulders, and moved back to the window bay while gathering the hem of her slip. Before stepping up onto the desk to climb out the window onto a section of roof. "**Well?** You coming or not Eyebrows, cause this is on you."

Staring incredulously Satsuki hurried to pull up the hem of her own night gown in hand so she could follow Ryuko out the window, on a careful walk over unstable shingles, and down the grass covered hillside immediately accessible around the back side of the cabin.

The knee high grass disturbed by Ryuko's bare feet ahead of her going toward the lake shed fractions of white lights that floated off like fire flies into the air. Swirling and dancing through the breeze more and more of them came to life before settling far above like a slow reverse rain of sparkling dew.

As they floated by her Satsuki reached out to one to grasp it, but her fingers tingled and the light slipped through before it joined

the others blinking in and out of existence over the lake. Reaching a short wooden pier Ryuko got down to the end where she sat at the edge overlooking the water. Its surface mirrored the lights above, and was only otherwise disturbed by all manner of life below.

To Satsuki the scene was honestly nothing short of magical.

Sitting beside Ryuko she resolved herself to wait for her to start while taking in the beauty of the impossible around them. She let the comfortably warm and cold fingers of wind blowing waves in the grass envelope them in the surreal experience. Glancing to her side she watched Ryuko fold in her legs, adjust her sling, and slightly hold up her left palm. Hood left down her hair fringes lit up and fell into a rhythmic brightening and darkening that coincided with huge swirls of lights before them. With every breath in lights came to the outstretched palm, every breath out scattering the flow far further than any breath could carry on.

With some minor discomfort from stretchering out the sore musculature around her hips Satsuki managed to copy the leg position. Or at least got close enough that it drew a curious glowing eye.

"Do I even want to ask?"

"Is this not some part of what you are about to do?"

Blinking once Ryuko looked down to eye her hand. Bringing thumb and middle finger together to create a circle in the otherwise open gesture she glared at it as a white light settled in the arc she made. She clenched her fingers into a fist and pulled it back into her lap shortly after.

"Seeing as how we're indulging in *crazy* right now it was... *ritual*. It doesn't matter now. Didn't really matter then, *but we didn't know that. Won't matter tomorrow...*"

"Ritual? You mean it's *religious*?"

"We're getting off track."

"But this is-... Elven theology was practically erased from existence. I don't think anyone has ever even asked if the Fae had any such practices. I'm *assuming* you meant Fae at least."

There was a long pause as Ryuko stared out at the water before answering.

"We... *We did, when we were foolish enough to believe it...* What the *Low-born*, and *Huuminsah*, practiced though was entirely different to our... Both of the, *uh...* Let's say *young races* hold nearly the same pantheon with little exceptions if any. *Fake gods*

born of *myths* spread by *primitive tribal beasts* that would one day become *intelligent*. *Supposedly*. They, those that inspired those tales, were not *gods* though. They were just people who lived and breathed. *Special individuals in our society?* Oh yes. But try to explain to *primitives* that your race of technically *undying, unkillable, life-weaving* individuals aren't gods. *No matter what we did that cult never died. Divine retribution for being displeased of course... Or whatever it was they decided in their mud huts and garbled grunting-... Ow...* Can we get this over with before my *skull splits open?*"

"At your pace."

Ryuko's eyes turned upward to settle on the night sky. On the constellations and stars they were comprised of far above. Satsuki could once again see tears pool and roll down her cheeks as shudders forced themselves upon her body. From pain, or emotions, she was not sure, but she held her tongue for only things that could be important as Ryuko gave it her best effort to follow the instruction.

"It... **I**... **Grrr**... Darkness... W-Wind. **Falling**. Falling and a... A voice... E-Everywhere, but nowhere... O-Only the darkness, and the wind, and the pain... Pain. **Deep p-pain...**"

"Who's voice?"

"Who? Who is, was, will be... What? No... Not is. Not will be. Who... Who, yes... **When?** I don't... I don't know? Who I know? I know who... but **when?** When, when, when... What? Evil."

"Evil?"

"Evil... As it is understood... The most foul... **evil**... Uncaring, insensitive, diabolically malicious sack of living meat that... That this one hath ever known across the cycles."

Satsuki could feel a shift in the air as the voice toned down into a rough whisper. Cold air like an all encompassing blanket viciously ripped heat from the breeze before going deathly, unnervingly, still. Leaving her to shiver as she saw a blue eye lose all focus on their surroundings. The voice stabilized to deliver words cleanly, and unlike the broken lines before it.

"The butcher of the seven golden hills. Daedalus."

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A substantial number of the most loyal troops available to The Order being gathered north of the border for quite the

assignment had been slaughtered, her own body had been utterly *savaged* by a single *Elven harlot*, and a good portion of her precious face had been reduced to a scarred mass no cleric would ever be able to fully restore. But, *but*, she was the one standing on her own two feet again, and looking toward a vast burn pit billowing black smoke toward an orange sky. The church had been dismantled to recover what iconography they could bring back for *cleansing*, the houses had been searched for anything else recoverable before being leveled down to their filthy foundations, and the *bloody vermin* that pleaded so *desperately* for their lives had been thoroughly *interrogated*. Then sentenced appropriately for their crime of *opposing divine judgment*.

The air was heavy with the *aroma of burning peasants*, which should have been the final *satisfying touch* on such a momentarily fine afternoon.

But the conspicuous absence of a specific individual in chains, or rendered into a corpse otherwise, left her *frustratingly unfulfilled*.

Leaving the pits dug out by hand, *by the accused of course*, she made her way through former streets into what used to be the main square. With a scowl. Approaching a large tent erected in its center two golden armored forms standing guard at its entrance stepped out of the way, bowed their heads, and let her inside.

Daylight came in through small holes in the cloth roof above, and generally provided a dim light through the rest of the material. Good enough for a handful of men in similar long coats to work in for a day now. Hearing her they got up and formed a loose circle of five, their faces grim.

"Well?"

Three of the men turned to the eldest of the group who sighed, took off a pair of golden framed glasses, and spoke while stroking his beard.

"Ash and glass. Just the same indiscriminate trace as the dirt site before we had the soldiers bury the ashes of our fallen. The cobblestones here were even partially melted from the staggering heat that must have been generated by the spell, and had its originator the ability to do so there is no doubt it could have been a repeat of the fields. With good odds we can assume they intended to finish wiping out the legion, and us, but were unable to do so. Given how the elf could not save herself from the first blast we have no reason, nor evidence, to suggest any of them got out of the second."

"But is there anything left? *Anything?*"

"Not even a hair sister. Just dust in the wind."

Her hands curled into fists tight enough to crack her leather gloves.

"That stubborn bitch *would* vaporize herself just to make things more difficult for us."

"The Empress will be expecting at least word from her at some point. Without anything to send with a forgery as proof if required her paranoia will not be settled."

"I know."

"If she learns the girl is so much as missing she *will* leave the capital to search for her, and she needs to be there ready for the solstice *no matter what*."

"I know! *Damn it* we've traded one headache for another at the cost of so many assets-... *Or, maybe not*."

An idea brought a wide smile back to her face, and a lilt back to her voice as she giggled. The men were confused at her sudden turn but followed when she left the tent.

There was a way to keep the death under wraps, provide a plausible reason why it would be of the utmost importance for her *Majesty the Empress* to remain in Kinzan, and tie up a great many other miscellaneous loose ends all at once. Regrouping with other long coated figures sent to scour the valley for evidence of the Elf their return empty handed did not dampen her rising mood. The *knife ear* was no longer a concern even if she was a descendant of a hold-out from the Purges, and fires the inquisitors set would clear away any trace of *its* presence left in this gods-forsaken soil. Standing together on a pile of rubble they looked out at a setting sun she rose a hand up to grasp at. Sweeping her arms out as she turned away from the light, its rays filtered through her golden hair waving about the wind unbound.

"I have done my duty issued by her Highness and laid guard silently over our most *esteemed* princess, but alas, an *unimaginably great* dark wave has crashed against the pure white walls of her Imperial Bastion! Of course all forces that were available immediately *rushed* to fight against it, but such an *ungodly might* managed to repel every costly effort to reach the island and prevent a siege over these last few weeks! And then, goodness me! They were only a first wave! Aura above an army of cut throats and bandits the likes of which this world has never seen all gathered to put ever more pressure on those noble, valiant, defenders! Oh, *what a tragedy it. Will. Be!*"

Obviously the easiest way to take control of the situation, was to take control of everything.

Chapter End Notes

So I know I apologized for the last late update... Lets just say this went a tad beyond several self imposed deadlines ;-;

Next chapter hopefully before another... *940 something days*. Unless this was awful. Then I don't know. Otherwise this was the hard bit potentially. Been working on so many aspects I basically have the outline solid up to the very post post epilogue basically sorted... Side note keeping track of so many elements over literal years is... hard.

Other things as always in various states of production as well though. *Too many ideas too little time...*

And I leave you all now with a cryptic teaser of things down the road in this story. Make of it as you will... : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVWEb-At8yc>

A Winter Knight's dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"...It was you? Of all that could dare trespass upon these halls, You. You came here? To the very heart of this dominion among the seven golden hills themselves! This one would have undoubtedly been made aware of such a visit planned had His Majesty known himself. I say every eye under the sun and stars would have been hard pressed to not come and bear witness to such an event unprecedented. Thou could not have come by banner it would be unthinkable. Nor for the aforementioned could thou have arrived in service to thy Office. So... One is left to wonder. Why? What is thy wish?"

She was falling. Hurtling down at some angle through a dark void. Or sitting. It was probably both at sometime that was or will be. When was now when or was when if a when at all was hard to gauge. Despite that and a constant whipping of air a deep male voice was still clearly distinguishable. Its origin everywhere, but found nowhere in particular. An echo cascading through her. A warm voice that should be comforting in tone deeply unsettling to her in ways hard to explain. A voice she despised beyond reason.

"Nothing? After a stride here, alone, so terrifically bold and clandestine? You believe me to be one that could accept such an absolutely illogical response? Now I would never in a million cycles wish to even insinuate such a ludicrous notion under any normal circumstance of course, but, I am afraid I must assert that you lie..." The dump into her mind burned intensely through a body possessed. Somewhere. A shell left behind to experience an existence knowingly unknown in full. *Another place?* A place where she impacted a stiff barbed object that cracked, splintered, and shattered into fragments as she plowed clear through it. Then many identical others like it in a world engulfed in stabbing searing pains. Words momentarily lost in an overwhelming static within the mind as she tumbled. *"...our most-... -grace."*

"Easy!"

A static very familiar. A static that should herald the end of this ordeal. One though that, unlike any before it, all at once instead resolved into a shocking clarity unprecedented. Wounds screamed. The words soft yet made their way to the forefront.

"ALL yearn for something at sometime eventually. Such is found in every cycle without fail. Even those few who cut the strings that change The World Song's ever repeating tune surely? That must be why thou has finally found thyself drawn to the foot of this

workshop. To the flows of molten potential that collect here? Is it not? Again this one asks in the most humble of ways one can from one such as thee. What grand design dost thou have? What do YOU want?" The wind stopped. *"Mine? Oh, it is nothing so interesting as to be worthy of your time."* The jostle of impacts stopped. *"If that is what you want to know I am but a simple tinkerer as you have no doubt heard in passing during thy many travels since... Well, I assure you gone are the days our forges pour anger into form. I simply toil here, and experiment there, and wish to bring to light every magnificent note within that song The Goddess plays! As such it is truly the highest honor to be finally in thine... magnificent presence."*

Slowly falling matter beyond flashed into a tangible bright white space. Ground, air, and tiny floating particulate beyond the voice. While her pains settled into a general throbbing.

"You ignored our band for so long yet come now from so far bearing something so... so trivial? Shipwrights would be perfectly suited for such a menial task as-... Without the intercession of any hull?"

It was snowing. Limbs heavy and slow made shambling steps aimlessly forward an agonizing fight against a never ending pile of white fluff. Through it all her head swept to search the area left, right, and forward as she went. The only discernible forms to be found around though were the twisted and black corpses of massive trees standing tall forever frozen where they stood. Their dark obsidian glass surfaces melting into an otherwise blinding complete whiteout.

"Then... Oh that would be- No. Perhaps? Ohhh, why... Yes? It just might be ... Surely. Yes, yes of course! Boy come here you are needed! Call up the rest immediately! GO! I knew it. Truly it must be only the most daring of work, the most inventive thinking, that could ever hope to suffice the whim of one such as thee. The Collector's frame must wait there is far greater work to be done this cycle indeed. There might be ways yet for this to be done. Thy pale flesh is uniquely full of... possibility. Something that must not be squandered!"

When she tripped on an unseen obstacle beneath the snow he stomach flipped. Her body involuntarily curled back up as the sensation of falling overtook her once more. Flowing robes of red, black, and gold shed a buildup of dusted white on the way down into the knee high uniform mass. Only to be covered again as it resettled around her.

The jostle made her pains flare to life once more before calming down to defined localized points of origin. General sense of touch coming clear she jerkily spread arms clad in large sleeves to nuzzle her shaking face into the snow. The cold sent shocks of distracting alertness through her. It unfortunately did little to

mask the particularly unbelievably heavy grinding in her shoulder blades though. That, by far, eclipsed everything else she was experiencing. Upon finally noting the presence of that pain in particular her mind swam with another flash of words.

"Keep the pumps flowing! We must curtail the regrowth or the assembly won't interlock successfully with the underlying structure-..."

"...Where is the blasted-..."

"There-... -er-... Splitting bundle now..."

"Carve it aside-..."

"...within-... Grab that-..."

"...Just a little more pressure to splice in-..."

"Pour the metal in now! NOW! I SAID DO IT-..."

In a final series of bursts of broken echoes and emotion the voice finally left. She was alone in her misery in the snow. Wishing nothing more than to forget the aches that remained she focused as much as she could on the cold. On the small frozen flakes tapping upon her hood and ears. On the embrace of ice slowly seeping through layers of cloth and golden metal fibers to reach her skin. On sobs that flowed freely as the snow slowly piled over her to become a thin blanket that could hide a miserable existence from the world.

Why had she done this?

She simply lay there waiting for the pains to stop. Time passing as quickly or slowly as it would while unobserved.

Her solitude was not set to last though. Eventually footsteps approached in a steady crunch that grew as an individual walked up to her by way of the path she had made, and went around to kneel down in front of her after gently kicking clear a place to do so. Where they waited for her to look up herself on her own time.

"Is it that man, or another?"

Snow shed from her hood's golden edge as she craned her neck up. She found herself staring up toward a pale sharp face framed in long hair so fair it may as well have been white. Where it was not shining directly as such. Their eyes were a deep crystal blue glow surrounded by powerfully red painted lines. Head otherwise protected from the snowfall by a white hood decorated in blue flowers and silver designs. Their ears rose up through two holes in the material, the upper edge of each covered in delicate silver plates linked together by chains. The figure's robes bore a

handful of similar features to her own, but was mixed into an armor mail of more white, blue, and silver with just a hint of gold here and there. This figure's voice was quiet but firm. Infinitely more welcomed. Though it was over time filled with a bitter hollow ring in her ears. Not that it was intentionally being delivered as such, no, that was coming from elsewhere deep within the layers of existence.

"White? White... of Winter? A Winter Fae?"

"Why?"

She still had no answer.

"The finest work of old war smiths and new grand artisans has been conferred to you for some unique enterprise. Not I, nor other Arbitrators, nor even the crowns of The Greater Alliance themselves could fathom such a plan. One you sought to carry out without discourse, and rose concerns across Winter for staling the construction of quite the necessary component set for an installation. I would dare to spike my tongue at thee for this sudden lack of wisdom and foresight, and accept the wrath of The Goddess for it if that must be. But this scheme has left you to shake and whine like tumultuous young boughs in bitter wind... It is honestly quite a disturbing thing to witness. I have never seen you reduced to such a state nor expected to." The woman sighed at her, shook their head, and reached out. **"Come. Come up old friend, come up. This won't do."**

She felt hands grasp her to pull until she sat up herself on her knees properly. She still avoided prying eyes seeking explanation. Yet her voice was found to hopefully satisfy that, and spilled forth words that poured out from within.

"This prototype is a scourge upon my bones. The anchors of vestments are nothing in comparison to this- this atrocity! What was his mind addled with to perceive this design as sound judgment!?"

The woman deflated in posture somewhat while glancing over her with a critical eye. She folded her hands and frowned.

"From another I would refute as hysterics, but you? Such pain can exist? What hope is there for us then should we attempt the same-"

"Don't! Just don't! It's not worth it! Not at all. I will render him broken no less than thrice for this affront. Count thyself lucky not to be the bearer of such... Such a stupid idea in the first place! What will I do with these wretched things?"

"Is this not too quick to pass such judgment?"

"You jest."

"Nay. From a certain angle it has its merits. Surely it can be removed, refined through another cycle, and attempted again? Practice at least might yield greater result than thy first... ambitious attempt to spread them. I've known you well enough to say you will stubbornly reach thy goal eventually."

Her voice lost again she next looked up when the other woman moved. Shifting forward white sleeves reached out once more and surrounded her, to pull her into a hug. She grunted when a tap came on her back through the layers of material. The hands shifted away immediately.

"Touch irritates?"

"Greatly."

"...May I?"

She hesitated, but turned in place and let most everything on her wisp away into smoke which was absorbed by complicated thin straps of material left behind from her neck down. Wonderfully cold fingers brushed her back, pushed some aside, and traced painful lines across her shoulders with a gasp.

"I... I thought it was just another layer. This... This is... What in Fate's name- Good Goddess above, w-what did you do? WHAT DID YOU DO!?"

"Nothing so simple as an anchor would confer the connection required to operate. Purportedly. An integrated armor core too slow to automate it. It had to become part of the whole the lout proudly professed with his carving knives. We tried otherwise though. It was as said. There was no other choice to be made. So this was done, it has become, and will stay forever more."

"YOU WERE SUBJECTED TO PERMANENT ALTERATION!?"

"I say again, no matter his office the scoundrel will bleed for this abomination. Such an awful thing must never be brought about again so I swear upon my office. The Crowns will agree so much as I can assume, which should make this official at some point. I should have known better. I am supposed to KNOW better-"

"You must be centered or her majesty will bother you more than usual. And if she demands proof and finds... THIS. Goddess there will be a smiting fury of unwise proportions from one end of Terra to the other I'm sure. I'll see what I can do to try and mend such... such utilitarian reconstruction, at least. Do I then have your express official permission to commit such a vile and heinous sin to rectify the last burned upon you?"

"It cannot be worse. Do what you will."

"You really should rest for such a process."

"Rest?"

Hearing a conflicted hum of acknowledgment to her huff of a retort a white light lit up behind her. Gritting her teeth she closed her fists as the pain flared up through a cold spike. Shuddering and writhing she clawed at the air in front of her as the feeling surged across her back to engulf her, but only one arm responded to her nerves. Another pair of hands came down upon her to firmly grasp her.

The white world flashed to blind her completely. When the light faded the stars of the cosmos far beyond the sky filled her vision. Where there had been snow abound was now the twinkle of dancing sparks in the night air. Large and small alike floated, shifted, crashed, and flowed. She was alone. Through burning throat she raspily wailed.

*"For one this, rest? This one!? Skadi... How, Skadi? Tell me! **TELL ME HOW!**"* Her senses all burned from being overloaded. The world had shifted and nothing made sense. Up, down, motions, sounds, and sights all clashing to exist at once too quickly to process. Body too slow to respond. She simply twisted and writhed hissing out her pain. *"Never rest under sky nor soil nor soot! Skadi! Skadi... In trench and field soul so known by I. Soul so bound to suffer and burn in blood and fire of kind! Dark to Dark. You were the last of three swords escaped to the void's merciful obliterating caress of us final four... You of all should know. Know of why. Tell I Skadi, h-how do I?"*

Eventually though her senses settled. The burn in her mind lessened leaving just present thoughts, or the lack there of. She was on her back. Where from above another face finally dared loom. Cast alight by the floating lights around she was being silently watched closely by a pair of eyes that could not stretch any wider. Eyes she recognized but could not name. With a grunt she shoved away from the figure of strange recollection she had no business to know. It was not possible to know one of *them*. When they tried to follow she forced her hand out and lit a disk of red up before her palm. The threat worked in keeping them back. Where was she though? How had she gotten here?

"Ryuko?"

The word rang. Recognized. That couldn't be, and it made the ache split down her skull again to throb. Cast dispersed she grabbed her face. The glade. The house. The pain. *Satsuki*. She hunched forward to stare down at her knees through spread fingers. She wanted to say nothing. She wanted to think nothing. She was exhausted.

"I... R-Rest."

But an echo of a voice surged back to her in answer. **"Rest... Oh? Ah... It has been long..."** Startled she sprung her face up to look around. It was filled with a pain and sounded about as drained as she felt. A breathy hollow whisper struggling for air free of the static of mind. That was not rebounding off nothing to come in waves no this voice was direct even if weak. It was not from the still lips of Satauki across from her on the dock staring confused at her search. **"You I fear know better than any other... Unfortunately there is no time... to rest. There never was, will be, is... It is time to wake up... You must remember... Old friend."**

She tried to blink and her mind felt a single painful sparking jolt surge in the dark. The dam had been opened, and she was smashed by the flood.

A smell wafted into her nose. It was a distinct scent. Of *Terra*, of trees, and clover grass. A pair of warm hands came around from behind her and covered her closed eyes while she sat cross legged on a grassy hill. A playful voice rich and sweet given directly to her ear from behind by the one the scent always seemed to carry from.

"Guess who."

"Must we?"

"Certainly."

"The albatross, blacking out the world beneath its wings."

"Naaay! Again."

"The trent, tall and casting shade wherever it roams."

"Nay!"

Grabbing the arms she pulled to twist the figure around into her lap. The woman attached to them giggled as she opened her eyes to glare down into a pair of bright green ones like glowing emeralds above a dusting of freckles, and surrounded by vibrant golden locks of hair let loose from a gilded green hood falling off. Each strand like pure bright metal shining when it caught the sun's light at just the right angles.

"A troublemaker who will give me no peace."

"Oh boo, don't be like that."

"There is no other way for me to be. Such is the calling."

"Blessed Fate could not possibly have ever brought you to me solely to have us exist as separate e'r more. I've missed you so..."

"I go where the wind blows."

"The wind blows through mine robes often, Love."

"Stop."

Pushing the woman from her knees she put out her hands to either side and held up her palms once more as before the interruption. The other woman was upset at being dumped onto the grass. Brushing off layers of green skirts she sat identically before her, save hands kept tightly as fists in their lap.

"Why do you deny this? You always deny your heart!"

"This one is not permitted to have such feelings. My duties are above me."

"Your duties are to thy office and the arena. Beyond that you are you! Look at me." Despite herself she opened her eyes again, and tried not to stare at the frown before her that tightened a vice inside her chest. **"I know who you are, but could anyone scold you for being alive?"**

"Life is not my domain."

The woman reached out to grab her hand and pulled it. Offering no resistance it was dragged onto their chest.

"Well, this is mine. My heart ever yearns for you beneath this armor. I own my domain therefore I have the authority to invite you to it! Make a pilgrimage here, none will know."

"Fate will know."

"Fate decided to make us love, Fate will live with the consequences of that decision!" The form fell backward and yanked her forward to fall on top. From so close she could feel their warmth as a breeze came overhead. The glade otherwise abandoned to the grass and trees around them under a perfectly blue sky. **"Will you bless this warrior?"**

Face to face she had an urge. A dreadfully powerful urge to lean down and kiss her. Deeply. Longingly. But she could not. She could never.

"Are you to fight soon?"

"Nay." Her face was grabbed from both sides and pulled down to put their noses together. The red of rubies on chains along her ears

scattering red dots of light at points around edges of her vision. The legs beneath her own splayed wide before finding hold on the back of her calves to trap her there. Another warm wind came in a flurry of gold and green, and she was left atop an almost fully nude luscious form that radiated life. **"But in some cycle forward I will inevitably. Such is our responsibility."**

She spread her arms and embraced the woman before she could be moved further. Through sheer force of will she ducked her face to one side and held her where they lay cheek to cheek. The woman below her though rolled to the side and continued until they went down the hill. Taking control of the movement she ended up under the shade of a tree where she held herself up above the woman now pinned beneath her hands. Who took the opportunity to bite their lip at her and breath deep to push their chest up at her.

"Now you bring up responsibility?"

The woman laughed and just started running fingers along her robes until she let her torso down trapping the two hands between them.

"Forgive me. For I have disrupted thy meditation to seek an unorthodox blessing. I ache for it you see. I ache for you. And only you." A hand wriggled free so a lone finger could once again trace up along a breast, to her shoulder, down her side to her waist. Every moment spent in opposition hurt her core to its deepest reaches. The waves of feeling making their presence known within her was maddening. In her silence the woman continued.

"Such a sweet harvest fruit to pluck... From afar so cold. So alone. Yet in reality so ripe, tender, and juicy for those with the courage to... bite."

"Oh goddess, just shut up."

She was given another giggle. Leaning down slowly her will to resist ebbed. It was many kinds of wrong but she could no longer hold back. Just once. Just one small harmless little indulgence. She went for a kiss on that damn giggling mouth, and started rolling her hips when fingers dipped down between her legs fishing for a specific point below. She closed her eyes to lose herself in this one relented act of selfishness.

And then the world was fire.

Again her skull was wracked with a jolt. Again and again cold pain flared firing into her nerves. Which gave way to a blast of heat from an explosion of light off to her side which melted the bare soil like that already scorched beneath her running heels. From the dark sky a thousand such beams of light fell like rods into the ground as far as the eye could see. Far above explosions, shimmering lights, and scattered lines of light tore the clouds asunder. Metallic cracks, splintering wood, and massive booms echoing far and wide. Around the remnants of forests were

obliterated, mountains carved into shards that toppled to the ground, and debris flowed across the blackened landscape like tidal waves.

In the middle of this hellscape she swung a red translucent blade long and curved. Its dazzling perfect edge locked in a clashing sparking dance with a golden spear and tall ornate shield. Weapons wielded by an imposing highly ornamented woman clad in pure shining golden armor from a helm topped in a tall horse brush mane of bright copper bristle, to a corset of a sort molded to their heavily muscled olive skin, among other similarly highly decorated plates strapped with leather binds covered in a scroll of carved designs. She swung hard and fast but every opening around the spear was blocked by the shield. A fortress worth of active defenses her sword in all its might had never powered through. That wouldn't stop her from trying though.

When the start of a beam came down between them they were separated by a bone shattering explosion. Momentarily broken bodies flung into the sky by the force. From the vantage point she saw many other figures like them still locked in similar such combats. Blades swinging, riders atop ghostly mounts charging into the fray across the land to fight among the *bombardment*.

She felt sick.

Upon crash landing she skipped across the ground until she fell through a thin bit into a cave formed of glass. Molten soil had cooled to leave a tunnel of air gap empty. Soon enough though a pair of viridian short swords came down swinging for her bitterly. Not long after joined once more by a spear point as her first combatant entered the space as well.

The new field of combat was small making her sword hard to swing properly without risking a cave in, but through some careful maneuvering she managed to disadvantage the golden warrior more severely. The very moment a swing left their spear shaft stuck between the walls she charged suddenly to prevent them going for a gladius across the small of their back. With one elbow she muscled her way inside the shield's vaunted coverage. With the other arm she swung down at point blank range. She partially bisected the woman from pauldron clad shoulder to bare hip. And finally after so many hours the woman crumpled. Halves only held together by viscera tied links of spine that sprayed her in black from residual vessel pressure.

She used the shield to cover her back from a strike as she freed her sword to take up against the second foe.

She used the fraction of a moment to harden her heart to purpose.

Tossing the shield aside as a distraction she let a massive flash of blinding red light erupt from her back. The warrior in green

was forced to take a defensive stance expecting a coming rain of blows. But it was a stance with an opening she had long known all too well. She was able to exploit that to drive her sword straight and true up through the woman's ribs beneath green armor cups. Green shimmering field completely failing to even slow her blade's advance. She received shallow glancing blows in return from swings made at the awkward angle their proximity created. Pushing further she ran. Carried the body on her shoulder straight into a wall she rammed without any hesitation. Her sword deeply embedded into the surface pinned the squirming body to it.

Then and only then did she allow herself to relax and breath. She took a step back as the woman went limp and watched armor dissolve to reveal a frowning freckled face dribbling black spit. The pair of swords clattered to the floor to rest in silence. She let her own dispel in kind before she shuffled forward to grab the face in both bare hands to tilt it up. She watched the light fade from the woman's eyes. Green going pale gray as she *died*.

They would glow bright again eventually. As they had before they will again. They always would. But within her chest the pain was indescribable. She tried to keep herself composed. But she could not bear it. She closed her own and brought their foreheads together. Out loud she swore as the tears broke free. At kings and queens. At courts and responsibilities and *what must be done being what must be done*. At the uselessness of it all. Until words failed her in her building rage. Looking straight up she let loose a torrent of throat burning screams. Her own injuries long gone like they had never happened while she stood there holding onto a precious corpse of the most bitter making. The smell of death, and living blood heavy in the air.

"WHY!? Why must it come to this!? How do I stop this!? I've tried it all! I cut and cut and cut even more! FOR WHAT!? ANSWER ME ALREADY YOU FUCKING BITCH! ANSWER ME!"

To every call there was only silence.

"A-Answer me... Damn it."

There was only ever silence.

"Just... Fucking... P-Please? Please tell me what I'm supposed to do... That there's something I CAN do."

There had only ever been silence.

From above the hull of a ship came crashing through the cave as if in a final spiteful answer. She just took hold of the woman in reach and let the burning wooden mass smash into her without a fight. Take her momentarily from life and all the misery that such a hell brought upon her. The moment of impact though brought the jolting strain anew into her skull. Once again it threatened to

pull her through more pain, more misery, more of *this*.

She had enough of this.

With everything she could muster she fought to swim to the surface of consciousness. It hurt like hell. Like she was drowning in a pit of metal shards but she fought on. Until a crack of very different noise blasted out. Short and sharp like a block of ice had just been explosively shattered on stone. Her eyes shot open in a jump that became a blind yank against a force that momentarily pulled her body forward.

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Sparkles of light fell out of nothing into the water beyond the dock in small splashes. White and red light scattered and refracted off what turned out to be broken links of a chain made of solid ice falling down in a line. As they sat in the water they began to melt in a line pointed from Ryuko, caught once again in her lap to prevent the glowing head hitting the dock, out toward the field. Toward the city. When everything was still once more Ryuko was left quietly trembling and hyperventilating curled up into herself.

Satsuki found herself unable to do anything more than stare down to the side at the ice in complete and utter shock.

Eventually a wrist shakily rose up to be studied which got her attention back directly on Ryuko. It was still wrapped in the now slowly melting remains of the chain. She hesitantly reached out to grip the shaking limb to investigate it herself. Turn it to catch the light before grabbing the chain itself. It was cold. Solid. The melting surface had a slickness running down it that made keeping a good grip difficult but she managed to unwind it from Ryuko's wrist to bring up for study.

It was very real and bore hundreds of scratches and cracks. It looked old. Well worn. And made a solid thunk when she dropped it onto the wood.

She was at a complete loss as to what to even start to process first. Falling back on procedure priority went to ensuring physical well being. That had been the reason they'd done this in the first place anyway. Carefully she dragged Ryuko up to get a sense for how she was doing.

She stopped moving when Ryuko grabbed her by the side of the face and held on. In any other circumstance an offending hand that decided she was free to grope would have been removed both from where it was not invited, and from its bearer to ensure such invasion could not happen again. Given the circumstance a simple

prying off and telling off would have been in order.

However, if the earlier threat made coming down from such a disoriented state was any indication she realized she had significant cause for concern. She had witnessed just what could come from this hand, and fully realized such an amount of force directly applied to the human skull was most likely unavoidably fatal. Thankfully this time no red light was to be seen. For now it was just the firm grip of fingers upon her cheek.

Before she could figure a way forward Ryuko looked up and leaned into her space. The blue pattern of gears stretched wide to let blue pupils as open as could be. Blue light sparkling through beads of tears flowing freely down her face.

"N-Never. Again... You hear me? Never doing that again."

Ryuko turned away to cough. She let go and moved get away from direct reach altogether. Or at least she attempted to. Almost immediately she pitched over. With every turn of the head the world twisted and swam. Every one of her senses was shot. She was caught once more before she could fall off into the water below.

"I, is it actually over?"

"*Its gone.*"

"*They're gone?*"

"*Nothing but painful- **guh**, fucking madness.*"

Ryuko's words turned into another violent coughing fit. Her voice unable to rise above whispers further broke into more noises of pain from the motions in her throat.

"Easy." Satsuki attempted to help her up but in doing so brushed an arm across her back while trying to loop around her. Ryuko jolted from the touch as if it were an open flame, but just barely caught hold of an outstretched arm before falling completely out of grasp. "Names--"

"*A name what is, but a concept's noise!*"

Ryuko gave one last attempt to struggle on including more hissed words without care for the difference in language structures. That dissolved in another coughing fit that ended with her simply being held while taking shallow sharp breaths. Satsuki took the opportunity to pull up the still wet arm.

"Madness does not materialize solid objects from thin air. The last time I saw such a thing, heard such a noise, you violently entered the hallway of the inn. And I'm entirely certain you're no vision. I might not truly know who this *Skadi* is, but you called

out to her. And *that*, that ice came to pull you in a direction."

Ryuko didn't have the strength left to fight her. She stopped responding altogether and let herself be moved. Satsuki got them both to their feet and supporting her with a shoulder made their way through the grass in silence. Through the slow reverse rain of lights they went back up the hill back to the roof. Back to the open window she brought them through. Where Ryuko finally managed a weak answer. The words themselves an echo of what she had said in her trance.

"*Do as you will.*" Steady enough to stand unassisted at least for the moment Ryuko slumped off her cloak to set it back on the same wooden corner it had been hung for the night. When done she spied Satsuki do a double take before staring at her again. "*Woodinvalsiv?*" It took another moment for her to scrunch her eyes shut and press a palm to her forehead with a correction. "*What.*"

A shoulder of Ryuko's slip had fallen at some point leaving a swath of upper back exposed to the air. Skin previously covered by cloak, binding, and dress so far. Skin that for the briefest of moments had been felt. Skin for the first time Satsuki could see.

There upon bare shoulder was a very shallow divot in the bone of her shoulder blade. Perfectly circular in shape it was filled with the thinnest of shadows from the light of the window.

Satsuki pointed at her where she swayed, then reached around herself to tap her own shoulder. Ryuko looked down to blink at the fallen strap. Now acutely aware of just what Satsuki was getting at. Without a word she just pulled the garment back into place. Satsuki whispered into the night.

"*Permanently altered?*"

Ryuko ignored her and collapsed back into bed. Curling up in the sheets she turned toward the wall away from her to pass out.

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Just before dawn a small slap of cold water to the face awoke two young men from their slumber on the floor. Sputtering and bleary they instinctively rose up to defend against some sudden assailant or another. Only to find their self appointed watchman sitting casually upon a stool. In one hand a straight razor, the other a now empty cup of water he placed beside a full one employed in the effort to clean stubble off his chin. Houka double checked his bags for any errant spray while Uzu gave the gentleman responsible

a hard squint in the blue light. He was met with a grunt of approval for being awake before being ignored in favor of a hand mirror.

"Come on man I know you don't like us but that just ain't called for."

"It was clean water. I could have kicked you awake if you prefer."

"I'd prefer a loaded breakfast served in bed by a loaded--"

Houka coughed into his fist to cut him off.

"If warranted a nudge will do. I must assume there is a reason to be up before the sun rises in full?"

"Food, water, clothes, and a roof all take work. You live here? You eat here? You work here. And there's always work that needs to be done. I'm heading out soon to borrow a drawn cart. When I get back we're loading it up and going to town. You're to be fully ready by then."

"I see. I don't wish to presume that perhaps one might better use one's talents and knowledge to help in enterprises beyond what I assume is manual labor?"

"Son I was due for the trip before five more mouths turned up out of the blue. You have a choice of course. Work or starve. Only one person is getting a pass under this roof for two reasons. First she's maimed, and second *she owns it.*"

Houka tried to wrack his brain for an argument to be made but a hand clapped his shoulder.

"Well wouldn't you know it we were thinking of popping down to get some shopping in ourselves eh Dog? And we're getting a whole cart together and everything now. Even a local guide! Things are finally looking up."

"At what cost."

"Labor?" Houka rubbed his eyes before putting his glasses on.
"What? You asked."

"It was *rhetorical*, Uzu."

"*You're face is rhetorical.*"

They both flinched when Tsumugu motioned to throw his second cup of water at them. That stopped before any of the mess within could actually fly at them. But the message was received. Within the hour a cart drawn by ox was brought out behind the house to second smaller shed. The three men loaded it up with a variety of

bundles, sacks, and stacked pelts before being seen off by Kinue and Nonon who watched them leave from the front porch.

"Will those two manage to stop long enough not to be thrown out of the seat?"

"Dog and Monkey might be useless idiots often enough, but they can take orders. Speaking of two though, I'm surprised."

"At?"

Turning back into the house Nonon stopped by the stairs.

"Satsuki's typically up at dawn at the latest. Maybe a peek in order."

"Spying on Milady, and a guest of honor, would be most rude as a host." They shared a look then checked the front door to ensure none of the men had rushed back for something forgotten. And immediately started to tiptoe up the stairs. "But she was in quite a state yesterday."

"It would only be courtesy to let them know that breakfast was still warm."

"Of course."

"yes."

While the household had been generally trying to keep noise down, for the sake of the mentioned injured party at rest, the two were extra careful to not make a sound after turning at the top of the stairs. Down the hall they went to flank the door at the end where both cupped an ear to the wood frame.

From within though they could hear nothing.

Sharing one last nod they both took up a position along the knob side of the door. On a count of three they silently opened it just a crack to both get at least one eye on what was the state of within. From the limited field of view all they could spy was an empty bed though. Curiosity overpowering they pushed open further to get both their heads beyond the threshold.

Inside the bedroom Satsuki was sitting slumped forward head on her arm in a chair by the table under the window. But as soon as a hinge creaked she was awake in seconds. She bolted upright in the chair and blinked at the window before twisting around to find Kinue poking in.

Kinue looked down to find Nonon had made a run for it leaving her alone to face the questioning eyes. Excusing herself she pushed

into the room proper and folded her hands.

"I would ask if you slept well, but I get the feeling you didn't. Was the cot a problem?"

Satsuki stood in a stretch to rid herself of a stiffness from sleeping as she had.

"The bed is more than fine, I just... lost track of the hour."

"I see, well rest is important. I can't advise forgoing it as you may have." Kinue turned toward the second bed and the lump bundled in sheets upon it. With some gentle prodding she managed to get a messy head to blearily poke out from beneath. Kinue got down to be eye level with her and smiled. "And how is Milady doing?" Ryuko blinked, whined, and reached out. Kinue took her hand and held it. In small circles she rubbed her thumb as she gave the fingers a once over. "About as well as can be figured. A good stretch among other things would do you some good, but, perhaps a few more minutes could as well." She gave Ryuko a kiss on the forehead and let her turn back over to hunker down in her sheets away from the light. In a low voice she offered Satsuki a choice of clothes with yesterday's taken away for a wash. More simple garb was requested and delivered as a pile for her to take to the bath in short order before Kinue left for the first floor.

Satsuki went to leave but stopped in the doorway. She gave Ryuko's form one last glance and opened her mouth to ask something of her, before realizing she had too many questions to decide on any one in particular to even start with. She needed more information. She needed to know some things for sure.

Because either Ryuko truly was mad.

Or she was.

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Dirt paths under the cover of trees eventually gave way to a paved main road the cart wheels clacked against in a rhythm that filled a silence between the three men. Bones already weary from shuddering wood seat beneath him Uzu spied a another cart approach from the opposite direction. He gave the farmer steering a small wave. He frowned at his gesture being ignored entirely after nothing more than a glance.

"Guess he's in a bad mood."

Beside him Tsumugu huffed while keeping the ox pulling them along

on course.

"He's lost all three of his sons since the castle fell. You tell me if a man like that can be anything but."

Uzu looked at him before checking back over his shoulder to watch the farmer's cart continue away from them on toward the farms they'd spied on the way into the area.

"You know him?"

"I know a lot of people. Knew them before. Especially the folk around the edges of *civilization*."

"Hunting quotas?" Tsumugu ignored him as they passed a group of women carrying baskets on foot. "Come on man I know you don't like us but I'm right here and there isn't fuck all else to do."

With a small slap of the reins the ox is brought to a halt. Prompting Houka to sit up from his spot in the back among pelts and bags to poke his head up between them.

"*Boy.*"

"You're not that much older than--"

"Imperial troops killed my parents. They killed my grandparents, on both sides. They killed my king, my cousins, my friends, my neighbors, and my comrades in arms. *They killed the man that was going to be my brother in law.* And if you ask me I'm absolutely certain that the same bastards are sailing out in the north sea right now killing anyone trying to come in and out of port. Because who else, *who else*, would be so inclined to the past time of butchering civilians but the practiced masters of the craft. The singular one and *only* reason I'm tolerating any of this, tolerating sitting next to you is because one of the many people *I* lost came back from the dead among you." Uzu snapped his mouth shut and just watched the man turn to look him in the eye finally. "*So you tell me why on earth I would want to make small talk. With you.*"

As Uzu sank in his seat under the cold stare Houka decided to cut in before he could dig himself further into a hole than he already had.

"You have, or had, other siblings not at the house?"

Tsumugu glanced to him before turning his attention back toward the road to get the ox moving again.

"If you're looking for anyone else to help us or you, don't bother. No. Its just me and her that's all that's left."

"Kinue was engaged?"

"To a man most deserving to be called my brother... You ask her she still is. Always will be. She's vowed to wait for him to come home, or die a widow if the corpse ever turns up. She's suffered just as much as I have, if not more."

"I see, and I must offer condolences."

"Save your words. Even if you truly meant them I wouldn't believe them."

"I could give a thousand words to defend our honor in comparison to the likely force responsible for such pain, but I imagine you would rather us stay on task."

Tsumugu slapped the reins once more to keep them going as they entered the city proper.

From neighborhood to neighborhood Houka and Uzu studied the faces and facades as they went. Buildings bore the marks of war more often than not. People on their daily paths older than children rarely broke into anything close to even a smile. Every time Tsumugu stopped them in front of some shop or another he directed the two on what bundles to drag out and place where. His business with owners conducted in short whispers and subtle nods. Few of these stopped involved any exchange of coin into Tsumugu's belt purse. When possible Houka was writing it all down, and broke their silence between jobs to inquire about that.

"You're not accepting payment for some of these."

"Coin isn't the only way to pay. We've done without before when carrying coin only made you a target."

"Barter?"

"Favor."

"Who keeps track of such?"

"No one. No need. Here we are."

He turned the cart one last time into a smaller street and stopped before a two story brick building tucked just out of the way. He grabbed a bag himself from the small number left and directed the two to pick up the rest. Unlike the other stops he left them to that without supervision before heading through the front door.

Uzu took the moment to lean against the cart and rub his back.

"A blanket. Something. Is that too much to ask to soften this damn thing?"

Houka tossed him a sack from the cart.

"I thought you grew up with such grand transportation."

"Why do you think I left?"

After unloading a second Houka took his own short break to tuck his book into his shirt.

"They don't keep track. Wonder how that works out."

"From experience that's just how farm towns are. You just help each other because you never know when you need help."

"This isn't exactly some small community of survivors who's lives are hinging on single moments I reckon."

"Not small no, but man have you seen everyone?"

"Hard not to."

With sacks over their shoulders they made their way to the door before they could be given an expected earful for slacking. They found themselves in what appeared to be a bar. The walls reminded them of the cabin's sitting room laden with bows and spears, but joined with a variety of bones and plaques bearing trophies. After having a look around though the two men realized a low murmur of voices had stopped. All around the room grizzled men stopped whatever discussions were at their tables to stare at them.

Uzu tried to wave despite the bundles he carried.

When a particularly large man stood up and rolled his sleeves Tsumugu returned to retrieve them.

"They're with me Piotr."

The man looked to him and grunted before retaking his seat. Before anyone else could object Tsumugu grabbed both of them by the arm and pushed them along to a door next to the counter and a hallway beyond.

"What was that about?"

"The guys don't take kindly to outsiders."

"How does a bar survive without new customers?"

"By not being a bar."

Through another door they found themselves in a large space full of work benches, shelves, and racks covered in everything from

wood to bundles of canvas. On Tsumugu's direction they deposited their bags among designated spots for their contents. Unlike every stop before on their trip though he didn't take them back to the cart. Instead he led them out of the workshop into another side room. It wasn't the largest space but they were able to squeeze in well enough to stand before a desk littered with papers and small baubles. Behind it sat an old woman hunched over her work that looked up at them after they settled.

Her hair was just wisps in places, and all around her face were hardened lines of age in a quantity neither man had seen before. With bony fingers she gently placed her quill back in its well and gestured to Houka and Uzu to take seats before her. Only after they had done so did she speak.

"It has been some time since new faces came to this place. Been a long time since you've made new friends Tsu, hmm?"

"They're not friends, ma'am."

"If they were enemies you would have shot them by now. And they are more than acquaintances if you are willing to actually work with them instead of your usual lone wolf style."

"I didn't have much choice."

"Forced?"

"No. Just came with... Family."

The woman leaned back in her seat with a creak or three and narrowed her eyes to study the two men he'd brought. Uzu was going to grab something off the desk to look at it but Houka kicked his foot. Tsumugu was about to slap them both on the back of the head, but she waved him down.

She smiled.

"Lively pair and the city could use more life. So, to business. One of you has a list?"

Houka hesitantly took out his book, plucked from it a scrap of paper, and handed it off to the woman.

"Everything we planned to acquire in order of importance. Am I to assume you can arrange collection of this?"

She went down his list and nodded.

"I will have some people already going out to make stops on their way. But if I may this is an awful lot of food and medicinal supplies. And you two seem to be in good health. Tsu, might you explain what you're planning?"

"Planning?"

She looked up at him with a knowing frown.

"The last time you decided to stock up so much so quickly you went out and almost got yourself mauled by a family of bears."

"I was fine."

"You left for two months."

"I made up my work. I'm not going anywhere believe me. We just have five extra mouths to feed visiting."

"And how many are doctors?"

"One was simply wounded on the trip."

"Do you need a doctor out?" Tsumugu bit his tongue and started to sweat. "Well?" Houka picked up on his unease.

"She's in capable hands. I'm while not an expert moderately trained in white magic, and miss Kinue has otherwise directed treatment. She made requests for the more elaborate ingredients."

She looked back and forth between the two faces before returning to the list.

"Calendula, yarrow, and comfrey?"

"Lacerations if I remember correctly."

"Indeed. And how did she come to such injury requiring so much of this?"

"We've... had quite the trip."

"All the more reason to take time to relax. I'm sending a doctor."

Tsumugu took hold of the back of a chair and leaned forward.

"That won't be--"

"Tsu. What's going on? I know that look in your eye. Either someone's had a baby in secret and your trying to cover for the new mother, or you've gotten yourself involved in something well beyond some distant cousin or two bringing their own company."

"She's... Out of the hands of any regular doctor, ma'am."

The woman regarded him for a moment before stroking her chin.

"Hm, she's of the fair blood then?"

"yes."

"She was related to Aikuro?"

Tsumugu returned to his place leaning on a wall with a grim expression.

"Tangentially."

"Mmm. Then I must add some things to your list. She will have different needs, and some things that won't work for you will work for her."

Taking up her quill once more she jotted down some more lines at the bottom. Houka craned his neck to try and read what she was putting down.

"You know elf medicine?"

"They live rough lives in our world son. The creed of the hunter, the survivor, and the outcast is to know when to seek help, when to help yourself, but also offer it to whomever or whatever is in need. From a fellow hunter, to a field mouse caught on some twine."

Getting up she shuffled around to hand Tsumugu the page along with instructions.

"Give it to Braun, he'll handle the rest. Shouldn't be more than an hour or two."

"Thank you."

"Always. But Tsu."

"yes?"

"If she's well enough to travel into town I demand you bring her here. I do know a doctor that can give her once over at some point. He dedicated his life to the fair quarter before it was razed in the fighting. He can be trusted. And I will hear no excuses. Your sister is a darling, but a second opinion could make all the difference."

"That's... Really up to her at the moment."

"I understand of course. Otherwise give your sister my regards."

"Will do."

Business concluded Tsumugu shuffled them out of her office before

either of them could have a reason to stay and chat. Only when they were at the other end of the workshop, and out of earshot, did he sigh in relief. Both men had questions for him, but he turned them back toward the hallway leading to the front to walk and talk.

"So that's why we've made no stops to pick shit up on the way?"

"She's a tough old bird who's lived through shit we can't even imagine. Most reliable person I know for acquisition. This was the most efficient way to get everything."

"At what cost to the mission?"

"For the *lady of the house* we'll figure out how to keep the business under wraps later. In the meantime we grab a table, keep your heads down, and voices low. On the way back we'll swing through the neighborhoods toward the docks."

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"You haven't said a word all day."

After breakfast on Kinue's insistence Ryuko had sat out on the porch in a rocking chair to get as much fresh air as possible. That was hours ago. The only time she'd moved from that spot was to relieve herself, and return to the kitchen for lunch. Every question Kinue had asked had been answered with tilts and movements of her head. Every word from the two other women in the building ignored entirely. Nonon had eventually gotten back into patching uniforms as they waited for the cart to return with stores that would have to be packed away, but Satsuki had insisted on helping with any chores that could be done. Until everything Kinue could think of, *she figured what Kinue would allow anyways*, was done and she was told to rest herself.

All the while she had mulled over varied things, and as before her thoughts had often turned back to Ryuko. Which is what eventually led her to stand there beside the chair to watch a small group of ducks make a stop in the lake. Her question ignored as Ryuko just slowly continued to rock back and forth.

"I've done as promised last night by the way."

Again there was no response. So Satsuki walked around to stand in front of her. "You held up your end last night so I must mine eventually. To fully and accurately do so I have some questions." Ryuko didn't stop looking out to the lake, but her rocking slowed considerably. "Will you be able to answer them?" After several

minutes of neither of them budging from their positions Ryuko sighed and whispered one word.

"Why?"

"You have demanded to me that you must be insane. You yourself confessed that if this were not the case then you were *doomed*. To what you had not elaborated. But now, now I think I'm starting to understand. You fight with experience, you work with skills, you speak with knowledge, and so on and so forth beyond your possible years. Years as a half elf that has, as you admitted, inherited a soul. And what is the soul but the very essence of who we are? Who *you* are."

"And why does that matter? Why do you care?"

"Because if you really are crazy than so am I." At that Ryuko finally stopped and looked up directly at her. "The more I learn about you the less I'm sure I know who you are. The more I see and experience the less I seem to know and understand the world around me. The impossible has become reality far too many times to be coincidence. Its become a pattern."

"The books--"

"Are a simple resource however uniquely priceless they individually are. Your father a teacher for a time. But neither of these things are anything close to the learning that only comes from long term experience. *Experiences* you don't seem to be in any short supply of."

Ryuko stood from her chair with a frown.

"*I had plenty of 'experience' fighting for my damn life. Eyebrows.*"

"In the past days, weeks, and years. Or back *then*?"

Ryuko tried to leave but was blocked by an arm.

"Move."

"I cannot in good conscious ignore a debt to a service rendered. Be it in the future, or now."

"You are absolved. Move."

"I must insist that I cannot accept that."

"*You insist.*"

"I insist."

"You insist that I must be born to suffer pain I can scarcely describe!"

"No. You've described it quite well."

Ryuko turned toward her and clenched her fist.

"To understand, and wish such still? Bitch."

"If you are going to intentionally speak so as to not be understood I can only deduce it to be words you do not have the spine to say so they could be."

"You seem to have understood the intention well enough."

"If you have specific grievance with me I would prefer to know them, so as to address them or their cause."

Stepping closer in she grabbed the front of Satsuki's shirt and hissed.

"I've already told you, you're an impossibly persistent human. Bitch."

"If this were not the case I would have never come to talk to you. I would have never made my offer to you. You would have never left that glade and tree and little frustrating stream. Would you have preferred to be stuck there in that existence, or be standing here at home proper with those who love you that remain?"

Ryuko blinked at her. Then down at the arm held by a sling.

"I... I could have made it here myself. Intact. I brought you here."

"Then why didn't you before?"

"I thought there would have been nothing but worse pain here."

"But there wasn't."

Tearing her eyes back up she pushed into Satsuki's space.

"And how was I supposed to know!?"

"You probably couldn't have. Unless you *insisted* to yourself that you must go to see to be sure. Or have someone else push things along until you do."

Ryuko opened her mouth, but no retort came to her. Satsuki was right. She had spent years doing nothing but stay in a rut. Why? Why hadn't she moved on if it was so terrible. It was her land. But did that really matter? It had been her father's. Her duty to

hold onto what scraps remained. But she'd abandoned it anyway when defense became unfeasible. Was it better to do so then, or before killing dozens and almost being killed herself? In her silence evidently Satsuki figured as much and started to smile at her. And despite the indignity of being out maneuvered, she stared at her. Gave her words thought. And that tightness returned to her chest. A tightness she could now recognize.

Like on grassy hills, and in deep caves. For one who loved, and in time thoroughly lost.

Her face warmed and lights bloomed off her head. She gave Satsuki a shove and turned away to grab at the straps of her dress across her chest.

"Do I take it you understand where I'm coming from now?"

"And if I did?"

"Then you might understand why I ask for such questions to be answered. I do not have an immortality before me. I do not have life times. I have but my one time on this earth, and it is up to me to use it to its fullest. The very notion that someone could have any more is, well, there is a reason so many have tried so hard for so many centuries *if not more* to achieve immortality. To think that one might have such in their grasp, but refuse it to be the worst possible existence imaginable is... At the very least fascinating. But, what do I know. As you have said in a moment of experiencing what I have come to understand is what might have been, *I'm just a mortal.*"

"You... Would dare to consider this *privilege*? This pain, this suffering, this torment I live with. A *boon*?"

"To live is to accept the good and the bad of living. To have more of one would logically bring more of the other unfortunately. But again this topic can only be discussed if you allow it to be."

"You want to see where I came from so much? You want to see *the bad*?"

"If you feel that would help me to understand your position, sure."

"Then lets go."

Turning around with purpose Ryuko walked passed her and headed for the door. Satsuki gave chase inside.

"Where are we going?"

Ryuko ignored her in favor of tracking Kinue down. Finding her in the sitting room helping Nonon with threads she gathered her

nerve.

"How are you feeling Ryuko?"

"Not great."

"Well, you're up and about which is a start. Do you need anything?"

"Nanna..."

"Yes?"

She swallowed hard.

"I... I want to visit... Mom."

Kinue almost stabbed herself with a needle as Nonon's attention shot up from the uniform in her grasp and blurted out.

"What!?"

"R-Ryu, um... Are... Are you--"

"I'm fine enough to walk. It's... It's not that far. And I... I need to see everything. I need to know."

Kinue set the things in her hands down so she could fold her fingers together under her chin.

"I can't promise anything left on the grounds is distinguishable Ryu. Tsumugu went many times into the ruin after the fires cooled in search of survivors. He pulled few out of there, and from his descriptions it was already bad. Conditions of the structures would have only ever gotten worse since then. I'm fairly sure nobody has tried to occupy it because it would be too dangerous to do so... May I ask what brought this on so suddenly?"

Ryuko glanced back at Satsuki.

"I didn't come back here because I thought there was nothing to come back to. Won't know unless I go."

Kinue looked back and forth between the two suspiciously.

"I see. This afternoon the boys will be back with food stuffs and other miscellaneous needs that will have to be put away. The cart needs to be returned though and that might be as soon as possible."

"I have legs."

"That look like a cart ran them over. No. Absolutely not by foot."

"Then we use the cart and apologize if it's late."

Kinue sighed.

"Your mind is made. If you will it milady, it shall be so. I'll put some things together and let the boys know when they return. I don't suspect Tsumugu will like spending more time on the thing driving given the number it does on your back, but he will probably understand. I also take it you are going as well Satsuki?"

"It would do me good to see what has happened here first hand."

With one nod Kinue got up, apologized to Nonon for being unable to continue helping her, and set about preparing for a day trip.

Chapter End Notes

Another year, another long damn year. But here we are. As is now tradition unfortunately. Here's hoping the next year gives me time to actually update before next Christmas...

Didn't even get through more than half of what I wanted to but its already a bit long as it is. Until next time.

Where birds still fly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This was not the first time that Satsuki's orders had come on the shortest of notice possible, in a direction most unexpected, in service to results unexplained. All that could be done was to carry on in the hope that the woman was as ever thinking several steps ahead of everyone. Without attire fit for the *occasion* though Satsuki had concluded that the only appropriate option available was their uniforms. So Nonon had gone through their stuff to ready piles of gear for the road, *again*. Minus general Imperial insignia and cloth armor layers. Orders were orders and the repairs needed for the kit requested had been prioritized in a rush. She still had every complaint in the world to offer about this.

"I admit that I'm also curious given her *everything*, but out of everything we could be doing right now is this really how we will be spending an evening?"

Satsuki was using a mirror to help tie back her hair neatly and after some thought fit on a soft barrette bearing her army's crest on the front.

"Of the many things we are in need of doing some of the foremost in importance are securing the condition of our auxiliary. Physical or otherwise."

"Which now includes traveling to visit some headstones that may or may not be buried under tons of rubble? Traveling specifically when she should very clearly not be."

"Within reasonable bounds if this is what she needs, *or thinks we need*, then it can be done. It will take time to properly organize ourselves and fully grasp our situation. I intend to make use of the travel time to receive what information the boys have learned along their way."

"Did you say what we need?"

"She is struggling with her past."

"How does that relate *at all*?"

"I've tried to broach the subject. Several times in fact. But even so much as attempting to discuss it has been difficult for her to

accept."

"She barely speaks at all."

"She does with those she knows well or when otherwise called for. All things in due time. A father's assassination is... For that much I know how she's feeling. She's felt loss in her life. And for whatever reasons there may be she's never really given herself time to grieve. To return has opened those wounds, among others. A wound of any kind will not heal until it has been let to set properly. You cannot conquer that which you do not face. We will go as asked and help her with what she needs help with."

Nonon remained skeptical. It was obvious that something more was going on. But one by one the piles were made ready for the two men upon their return as ordered. Which she deposited on their bedding. Then she finally got to changing herself. Part way she stopped to look out a window to the field and a sparkle about the lake.

"Whoa. She's been sitting there making a light show for a while now. On top of all the previous empty staring at nothing."

"She is preparing in her own way for the battle she will face."

"By *collecting 'boom' light*? She isn't by any chance planning to blow the place up when we get there, right?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't *think* so!?"

Satsuki paused to glance out to where Ryuko had settled on the dock once more. Leaning forward she braced her elbows on the sill to stick her head out into the breeze. All around the water sparks danced among twisting wind around her form. Her hair, and dress, and various trailing ends of loose cloth swaying with the ethereal swells. She looked to see just how far they could be coming from and scanned the field. Which led her to see movement other than grass and leaves. Slowly trundling its way down the road toward them was the returning supply mission.

"I have every confidence in both her ability to do so if that is for any *possible* reason required, and lack of need to do so. From what we do know she has no propensity to enact violence against the dead. You should concern yourself with preparing to encounter the *living*."

Nonon joined her in sticking her head out and craned her neck to follow Satsuki's line of sight. She too spied the cart returning, and squeaked as she pulled herself back in to get a top on. Second floor or not she retreated far away from the window to dress without further complaint. There was eventually however much

grumbling out of the two men who'd been looking forward to the end of the supply trip. Houka had no less than thirty itemized issues with the vehicle he considered *dreadfully deficient*. Which he shared as the gathered supplies were unloaded and distributed about the cabin to Kinue's specifications. Until he was shut down by Satsuki with orders to "*Clean up, double time*".

Upon return Kinue had informed Tsumugu of their lady's *decision*.

He had marched straight out the door once more toward the lake without a word.

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She had no real sense of how long she'd been channeling when heavy footsteps approached. Grip released on the flow it stopped swirling to her call and dissipated. She jealously watched the carefree sparks of unburdened life fly on to wherever the wind would take them until visible no more. She was just about ready to bristle at Satsuki for intruding again. But it was Tsumugu that had come to take a seat beside her. His words respectfully held until she was visibly done.

"Still with us?" She only nodded. He frowned. He studied her some more before readjusting a boot. From it he produced a knife he held out to her handle first. She glanced over to the offered thing. He kept holding it out until she hesitantly took it, and turned the sheathed thing around to find a crest on the heavily worn guard. The eagle of her father's army once flown from every flagpole she'd ever known. She gingerly brushed it with her thumb as he continued. "I've seen things. Horrible things done by horrible people. And I know others who have as well. I know those eyes. The blankness of what feels like drowning in pain. Those are the eyes of a soldier who's seen the true depths of hell. Eyes that look, so much as yours at least physically can, *dead*."

She drew up her knees to hug them to her chest.

"Fae eyes dull and lose all color. Leaving only the blood within turning them gray."

"Wouldn't they be black?"

She corrected him very quickly.

"**No**. No they don't. Gray. Dull, ugly, gray that darkens the face from the loss of light."

He was taken aback by how sure she was.

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience there, but I know that there's no way you met another Nymph out there." The last thing she wanted to do was dive back into the madness by dragging it back up to explain herself. Not now. Not again. She felt a rough hand gently brush some stray locks of hair away from her brow and tucked them back over her ear. "You've been to war little bird. You've had to witness and experience things that nobody should. If now is not the right time, that's okay. But if or when you ever feel the need to talk about things I'm here for you. We are always here for you."

She whispered, "**Thank you.**" and gave the knife back.

"Of course. Hunters have to stick together right? While I never got the chance to really give you any proper tests I doubt there's anyone who could argue your experience. There is nothing more comprehensive than true survival. It's also been a real long time since anyone's been a *Dragon Slayer*. I know there was bigger things to talk about before, but that alone is quite the feat little bird. The student may have become the master." Despite everything she couldn't help but crack a smile. His own eventually fell with a sigh though. "That all said the storm this week was a bad one. There's no way it hasn't done more damage to the buildings that were already in danger of coming down. I get why its important. But to go *that* deep into the grounds to the chapel itself? The walls of the hill are a dangerous place alone."

She quietly shot back at him, "*Life's dangerous*", and lifted her working arm once more. Just long enough for her sleeve to fall and bruises to shine along her skin. "That has yet to stop me from *living*. I'm going because I can. It was inevitable. And, *I must.*"

"With the Imperials."

"I'm not the only one that needs to see what has... become. What's left of what was."

"*They've* been told."

"And have not grasped the reality of even *that much.*"

He was torn. He wanted nothing more than to talk her out of this sudden decision to hurl herself into more danger. But who was he to deny her, of all people, the right to pay her respects to the lost at the hill? Given the day's discussions he was forced to agree with her evaluation on the state of their *guests* too.

"If anyone left now they would likely be returning deep after dark falls."

"The dark is no enemy of mine. All the better to go unseen by watching eyes afar."

"If you get to moving at all. The ox is strong, but if it refuses to continue on with yet another load the cart is going to be stranded."

"If the ox will not move I will replace its function with something that should be more than good enough."

"A replacement? Something that would give away a wagon as carrying anyone other than regular folk if seen."

"If the blanket of dark is not enough I can just make us not able to be seen at all."

"I've seen stage coaches trying to protect themselves with that. You still know something big is there, and its not hard to guess what on a road."

"If your limited by rudimentary blind weaving."

"Heavy casting can't be good for your health at the moment."

"In scale it wouldn't be much. Even a stone might be able to hold it if it is a good enough copy."

He held a firm stare she met in kind with her own glowing unblinking refusal to back down. Any warning he could think to raise she seemed to have ready answer. She was determined to continue and willing to do whatever she could within her power to make it happen.

This standoff felt very familiar to him.

She was decidedly unique in many ways, but about the lines of her face were those that he had not witnessed for so long. Lines which bent in expressions that had carried such a similar conviction in many a heated debate through long tension filled nights. Carried the weight of decisions which had held the fates of many thousands of lives. He was no general, but he'd been in the room more often than not. He'd been one of few to be the first eyes and ears on the ground for his King no matter the danger. His judgment trusted when he recommended his sister for the job of taking care of his lord's only child.

On this very dock where there was once a child that shrunk when chided now sat tall a young woman of unbreakable will. No waver of fear. No self sabotaging doubts conveyed which could be used to tear her down. Just a drawn up plan to march where she deemed necessary. He was the first to look away. A small prick of nostalgia had wormed its way through his heart and caught him off guard. Beside which bloomed a deep burn of pride that threatened to take hold of his frown. He could feel his long dry tear ducts well up.

She could deny it all she liked, she was ready to hold the weight of a crown.

"*A little bird no more, hm.*" Tsumugu studied the far shore and the woods beyond. She was ready to continue arguing her case but was silenced by a solid clap on her shoulder as he took hold of her.

"I was once a young and foolish lad. One that made a promise to an old and serious man. I've grown old myself since those days. We all have in our own ways it seems. I will say this is still foolish as all hell." When he turned back in his frown cracked into a smirk once more, "But I'm not so old as to have lost *all* my foolishness. Who am I to deny my Lady's daring request? I will trust you know just what you ask, and are fully prepared to see it through no matter what. As it is willed so it shall be."

She shrunk some from the last point he made.

"This is no order."

"It's not?"

"*I refuse to accept the right to such.*"

"*That* is something we need to talk about as well."

"There is nothing left to say."

"You know that this isn't something someone can just *refuse*."

"***Try me.***"

He sighed.

"I wish it were so simple, but some things are necessary." Confused she looked at him with a tilted head. "There may come a time you will see the value in who you are Ryu. We told you already. Those bastards didn't revoke the mandate. They couldn't. And that is something you now carry. Never blame yourself for it. You are not responsible for losing Him. But you are the only one who can carry his hopes forward."

"I am going to get justice. Nothing more."

"I have no complaints with seeking justice. I just want you to be aware that you might... Maybe its best you just see for yourself and decide then. Just know that I have served. And I will continue to serve. So I vowed." He tousled her hair until his hand was swatted away. But he was hugged as best she could manage from the position all the same.

In the back of the cart blankets were spread about for the comfort of the assembled as they piled in with equipment. Everything from

shovels to provisions in case they ran into issues on the road. An overnight stop was not desired, but the final stretch of road had long fallen into disrepair. It was best to be ready for anything. Nonon ended up perched up on the front bench with her bow in hand in case any issue that arose was of the *violence inclined* variety. Other weapons and suitable tools stowed where convenient. With most everything and everyone loaded Kinue offered her hand to help Ryuko up into the back. Once she was settled and the rear gate was secure Tsumugu got them underway.

Not more than fifty meters down the road though Nonon twisted around and ripped a rolled bundle out from behind Houka to put under herself.

"Ow, hey!"

"Shut it dog this is horrid."

"Which is precisely why I took the extra!"

Seat now sufficiently padded Nonon leaned back to get as comfortable as she could given the conditions. Quiver shifted for ease of access she tried to get into a frame of mind to start what amounted to a field watch. She wanted to ask Tsumugu how long they would be going to know how much the next however long amount of time would suck, but she caught him glancing at her with a frown. She questioned him indignantly.

"What?"

He simply turned his eyes back to the road with a shake of his head.

"Soft."

"Uh, *duh*? I am a lady, and not made of wood or metal. Genius."

"I've seen enough of you lot. You call yourself *Knights*?"

Rolling her shoulder she pulled up an arrow from her waist and spun it about her fingers.

"Only the finest of *her majesty's personal legion*." In a fluid motion she nocked the arrow, tracked a bird down the way as it hopped along a tree branch, and fired from where she was seated on the moving cart. The arrow flew true and took the bird by its belly through a wing. Punched off of the perch by the impact it crashed to the forest floor among brush away from the road in a chaotic mess of broken calls and rustling green. The noise ceased by the time the cart passed the bush.

Nonon smiled to herself triumphantly and made a show of pulling a second arrow out to twirl it like the first about her hand. She

gave it a swing and poke to the air like a baton for good measure. "Instruments of string are mine to command with only the highest levels of grace, finesse, and precision. And don't you forget it!" Her smile twisted into one of smug satisfaction for rendering him so utterly speechless with her amazing skill. He must be awestruck with her prowess. He would surely apologize for insulting her honor and strength. When she turned back toward him though he was only more upset than before and focused on the road. "Nothing?"

"Was that supposed to be impressive?"

"Excuse me I just bagged a bird smaller than a hen, from a bumpy cart, while seated, and while still some two hundred paces out. In one shot!"

"Firstly you *bagged* nothing. You left the carcass to rot. Secondly out of a target rich in condensed vital points you somehow managed to miss every single one, and made it suffer the indignity of dying from a fall out of a tree. Claim and boast till you're blue, you are no hunter."

"I've been on plenty of hunts I'll have you know."

"Let me guess they were in care-taken forests."

"The finest around the capital of course."

"Your guides always found the game you sought, organized the dinner after for you, and led you all on quite the merry little chases that always went on long enough to wind you."

"It is a feat of physical prowess and endurance to--"

"But never enough to frustrate you. No. The prey never got away. There was never a hole around the bend to hide in, never a run to flee on, never a path that could not be followed."

"That- We--"

"Because the chase was designed. I know of such things. Knew those who've been desperate enough to organize them on behalf of those who paid them to do so. Such *excursions* are by no definition a hunt. They are nothing more than a twisted game setup for the cruel and uncaring. The *feature* of such events the small lives tortured before they are executed. Pain and loss for nothing more than the short lived senseless amusement of the soft and incapable."

"What, you killing things is so much better!?"

"We are a part of the order of life, and a *hunter* has the *utmost* responsibility to act as such. If that which you hunt is more cunning, more quick, or more ferocious than you and gets away then

that is how it was meant to be. They will live on and in doing so their children will be just as strong or fast or smart. They will keep their breeds strong. To catch and kill is to cull the weak from the herd."

Nonon stopped spinning her arrow and looked at it.

"Well I did just that. The idiot was out in the open, so it was shot unlike the rest that weren't."

"In only the most sloppy and cruel way possible."

"Its a *bird*."

"That died with undue suffering. Who's life that took time and energy to grow now gone to waste. You may shoot a bow straight and technically true as you like. I would dare hope any soldier trusted with such a tool should be expected to do that much. That is the bare minimum. That alone does not a hunter make. To take the body and make use of it to its max gives more purpose to the life cut short. You disrespect the life lost if you let it go to waste."

"So why didn't you stop?"

"You decided to hunt, you didn't ask me to."

They fell silent as Nonon shrunk in her seat. It felt like her own father had just reprimanded her. She felt a guilt grip her she wished was not there. In an attempt to avoid it she tried to change the subject back to what she wanted to ask in the first place.

"Where are we actually going anyway?"

"The old castle a bit out of the city. Likely just the town. Deep into the far end of the grounds itself if possible. As far as we can get."

Answer given he only gave her more silence. Which annoyed her.

"And? How are conditions, what are the actual odds we find trouble, is there anything I should know about local scum of note?"

"We will get there when we get there. I would hope a *Knight* should already have an idea of what to watch for."

Nestled in behind the front bench Houka thought to steal back the spare blanket not long after losing it. When he tried though Satsuki bunched up her own and threw it at his face to prevent an argument. Their conversation kept low to not intrude on the one above them.

"The cart is what it is Houka. If we find ourselves in need of one again we can talk of finding alternatives then. Your report is needed, not complaints." Relenting he opened his book, flipped to a page covered in scrawled lines, and handed it to her. "A map?"

"Apologies for its rudimentary nature. I was not afforded the opportunity to stop by any places that may have had a proper one to work from, and the places we found ourselves were not where one could be found."

She waved the concern off as unnecessary.

"This much will do to start. When we set forth to do so can we expect to get to the Company in a reasonable state and time?"

"Traffic was light through the day and this is apparently the norm nowadays. Four or five times as many people about would not hinder us in the main streets unless they were concentrated at specific intersections. Nobody was keen on stopping us specifically, or anyone else for that matter, without due cause. Beyond that is where we unfortunately ran into an issue. We couldn't contrive a reason to take the cart directly around the location itself."

"Why?"

"The district is in lock-down. Private guards are watching anyone about the streets with backup further above on the rooftops. Most of the whole neighborhood is a don't stop unless told too. With the far end closest the dock completely inaccessible by road due to roadblock barricades."

"Given events any warehousing space is likely full and efforts are being made to keep uninvited guests out before any of it can wander off."

"Per standard operating protocol at such a time seeking an audience with the local company administration directly would be difficult at best. It would only be granted under few conditions."

"Any signs indicating who is specifically in charge?"

"None of the literal sort on the buildings that could be seen from the angles we were afforded. Brackets for such remained however. We can assume any direct visual ties to Imperial anything may have simply been taken down to avoid conflict with the neighbors."

"What of the guard?"

"Heavily outfitted. Uniform colors on their tabards worn over mixed plate. Pattern is yellow and black in vertical halves."

"Hm."

"From memory only two families use yellow. *Date*, and *Takarada*. I am unsure how *Date* could have grown so quickly from river boats last I knew to a whole north sea route. *Takarada* would have the men and ships to do it, but their operations are spread across the south around to the subcontinent."

"Plenty of competition for those routes."

"To put it mildly."

"Perhaps this was a way of expanding horizons?"

He shrugged.

"Maybe. Entering a whole new ocean is a lot of risk though. No matter how it had gone one of their sons would have bragged about it, or cried about the losses, by now."

"Unless silence was demanded of them."

"Or bought if we're being honest about *Takarada*."

"*Indeed*. If this *is* under *Takarada* then that also means we should be able to simply buy our way through. If all else fails we could book passage regardless of the vessels' intended manifests."

Satsuki raised her voice to the rest of the cart. "Miss *Kinue*?"

The woman in question had settled into her spot and spent time observing the world as it went by with a wistful smile. Occasionally probing the hooded mass that was *Ryuko* on if she needed anything.

"Ah, yes?"

"My apologies is this not a good time?"

"Please, I was just lost in thought for a moment. Its... Its been a while since I've been on this road. What do you need?"

"I am under the impression you have kept up to date on the upper on-goings about the local area. Would the name *Takarada* by chance have come up?"

Kinue leaned back and let out a deep breath as she rubbed her chin.

"Way back when there was an older gentleman of thin build that came on summons a handful of times to the castle regarding various import and export agreements. Property purchases. Tax rates. None of it was business I was privy too. I had my duties keeping me busy. I just know he came around at times early on as the traders were setting up operations."

"Would you remember his given name?"

"It may have been mentioned in passing but its been too long. Not his, nor the younger men that came with him I'm afraid."

"Others?"

"Guards and assistants in various capacities. There was one boy among them once that looked to be a son or other relative in finer clothes though."

"Ginger?"

"Yes. That I recall distinctly. A plump little carrot being taken along by the hand and doted on. A nephew I think."

Satsuki rose a brow as she shared a look with Houka.

"I don't suppose you know if any of them are still about?"

"We've gone to pains to avoid the Guild. So I can't say I know if any individuals from that time are still about it. There is much business being conducted among them that makes one strongly wish to never meet the individuals involved."

Unlike Nanna Ryuko had actively tuned out the conversations about the cart. She had rested her cheek on the wood side to peek out from under her hoods to watch the trees go by. Everything ignored to focus her attentions squarely on the drone of wheels, the faintest caress of wind, and rumble of motion through the sparse woodland around *civilization's* edges. The sounds, the sights, and motions were a nostalgic cacophony from days long gone. Days when she had a restless need to run the trees. To innocently wander the infinite expanse of green to every wooded corner there might be known. Uncle Mohawks rough wisdom chewing out others. Nanna's soft reassuring tone buzzing about her ears. She was so very tired now, and comfortably nestled where she was in a way only known to the traveled.

Before she knew it her eye lids felt heavy as woods gave way to fields and fields gave way to woods.

Others carts on the road were encountered but such rare events were simply more little notes in the song of old rolling through her mind.

Her breathing slowed.

All was at peace.

All was right.

All began to grow cold.

She gripped the side of the cart and bolted upright in her seat. She expected a wave of static to try and overtake her senses. She expected an assault against her mind from within. That did not come. All that happened was everyone in the back of the cart stopped whatever they were in the middle of to note the sudden disturbance. More than one hand went to grab the handle of a hidden weapon as Kinue shifted over to give her face a once over.

"Is everything alright?"

She waited for a few more moments for an assault that never came.

"Its nothing."

Kinue was not convinced though. She knew her far too well and was damned to just let her suffer any more alone. She frowned and prodded at the corner of a grimace still held on her face.

"Ryu? What has been ongoing?"

Ryuko glanced at her from the corner of her eye, then looked back out toward the woods.

"It passed."

"It? Within from?"

Ryuko didn't elaborate. Which didn't help Kinue's hesitance to give her the space she evidently wanted. Eventually after enough assurances Ryuko was left to relax again in her corner. Conversations resumed which she ignored once more as all she wanted was to fall back into that blissful peace. She wanted the ride to continue as it had. Another short cold jolt made itself known. She refused to let it get to her.

Until the blackened roofs of shattered towers crested over the treeline. The static came. Like it had broken free of her mind to fire down the rest of her in paralyzing shocks. Carried by a swell of anxiety made potent by the burn of what had haunted her nightmares. All noise ceased beyond an all encompassing ringing silence.

Which was cut by a single sound when she stretched her concentration to find anything about. A flutter of wings from a white speck making lazy circles far above. She craned her neck up to track it. It was too far above to have been heard in the wind like this though.

It felt powerfully familiar, but recognition seemed to just ever so barely elude her. She knew all about it, but could not connect a name. Which lead her to presume why. Worse still it swooped down

toward the cart to continue its chase with the rest of the occupants none the wiser. The closer it got the less it looked like a real bird though. It had no feathers, no discernible colors, and no distinct features at all really. It was remotely a raven in shape composed entirely of glowing white light. A white solid mass of well defined edges that flapped to slow its descent enough for it to duck and weave through the odd obstacle in the trees. Its glowing body occasionally flickered before quickly re-solidifying.

It had no eyes but Ryuko could feel a cold stare directed at her from the thing.

Eyes of white light that should not exist.

Could not exist.

After a ways of travel the trees parted and sound returned. The bird's shape began to destabilize. Light sparks hemorrhaged from its wings as it took off toward the sky in a burst of flaps. Over the heads of the assembled it flew once in their same direction before it vanished. Burst into a cloud of white snow flakes that disintegrated high in the wind before falling any substantial distance.

The cart trundled on blissfully unaware.

Ryuko thought that she could finally have some peace. The hope was dashed by a gasp from Nonon. Tsumugu raised his voice to make a somber announcement.

"We're here."

At the end of ruined fields filled with red wildflowers they found themselves pass through what was once a gate to a castle town. Piles upon piles of broken materials overgrown with vines and the same flowers stretched far and wide. Timber burned and rotting stuck out of stone corpses of what were once buildings. The piles separated by thousands of smaller stacks of rocks and dirt scattered positively everywhere.

Stacks that gave the visitors from lands south significant pause.

Nonon ripped the cap from her head and swore.

"*H-Holy shit.*"

The knights got up as best they could to take in the sight. Among seemingly infinite piles were shapes that varied to cover almost the whole range of divines, save one in noticeable particular. They were grave markers. An army that stood in silent vigil above the flower strewn debris field. Their forms comprised of steadfast stone, rotting wood, and splintered material assembled on site of

every indecipherable origin in between. The knights had thought themselves prepared for visiting *some graves*.

The sheer scale of the massive graveyard the cart continued to rumble through was unfathomable. Block after block they expected to eventually reach an end to the headstones. Find regular rubble *eventually*. But it was endless. Burial mounds in congregations so dense one could scarcely think to even begin counting those near the main roads. And they sprawled from along that, to every corner yard, to every open former room, and every alleyway soft dirt or stone hard. Each and every possible open bit of land, other than the very road itself, had been surrendered to the dead in a sea of graves overgrown by the red petals currently in bloom.

What was once the beating heart of a fledgling kingdom had been rendered still. Only the breeze, the rustle of plants, and occasional chirp of birds remained. The echo of the ox's hooves and cart wheels was a haunting ghost of what once was as they rolled.

Not a cloud could be found in the sky, but not a single filling breath could be had.

Satsuki grabbed the back of the front bench to lean between its occupants. She couldn't find the voice required to utter the words for what she wanted to ask, but Tsumugu knew. His answer given in the serious monotone of a man who once again had to speak beyond any desire to do so.

"Every loss was let to lie here. At first it was simply not possible to move them elsewhere. There was not enough able hands left to do so between the injured, those desperate to defend those who still lived, and those who tried to take advantage of the chaos. It only got worse as bodies piled up from all around the kingdom. They were in need of such a place. A safe spot of land that would not be disturbed. So they too were brought to the only place that knew peace from the turmoil. *Here they lived, let live, and died. Here now the many lie. Forever side by side.*"

One by one the rest of the Knights pulled off their caps lest the gravity of the place be forced to their shame to do it for them.

Up the road they continued. Through the remains of a second gatehouse. Until they reached the once heavily fortified hill around which the town had been made. Gates that once protected a grand entrance in a great stone wall were a mass of metal twisted and rusting on the road. Joined by pieces of said wall scorched black when it was scattered around by blasts. As had been told. Progress could no longer be made so Tsumugu finally stopped the cart. He leaned back in his seat and stared up at the scene before him. They all did.

Standing silent above it all like the headstone for a Kingdom

itself was what remained of the castle complex. Much had crumbled in places. Other sections had been overtaken by a coat of vines twisted and creeping over the stone it could claim. But the bulk of the castle still stood. High up at the peaks of what remained flew old red flags. Burned, ripped, and abused by the elements, but still bore the kingdom's eagle. The last place where Aphaean flags still fly.

On shaking legs Ryuko finally stood from where she had been held by Kinue. She was the first to hop over the side of the cart.

The rest rooted in place watched her approach what remained of the main gate. She touched the wall and let her fingers trail over its long ruined surface. Truthfully she wanted to run away. She so very desperately wanted to run as far as legs could take her to the farthest reaches of the world away from this. *Again*. She reached into her cloak to pull out her stuffed pig. She clutched her most loyal knight to her chest as tears threatened to break free.

"P-Papa... I'm home."

.

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There was barely light outside when she was rattled awake by an immense blast that ripped through the morning air. An explosion powerful enough to shake the solid stone walls themselves followed by shouts, a series of more explosions, and clouds of fire which billowed into the sky outside her bedroom windows. Shouts which quickly became desperate screams. The sounds of cracking stone and timbers splintering echoed all around in a chorus of destruction.

She didn't wait for anyone to come to her. She jumped out of bed and changed out of her night clothes. She needed to find Papa, *now*, like he said she should. He had tried to calm her down over the last few days, but made sure to warn her what to do if something should happen. He had not been too terrible specific on what that may have been, but this was extreme enough to probably qualify.

There was no time to grab anything else. Trusty pink knight in her arms she tried to open her door, heard a small click, and was immediately flung back by an explosion that ripped open the ceiling in the hallway smashing the door into her. Frantically she scrambled back to her feet in a daze and ran forward despite it. Ducked under falling beams, coughed in eye watering smoke, and stumbled every time another blast rocked the floors. She was already scared. The shrieking of grown men elsewhere being silenced one by one didn't remotely help.

"Papa! **Papa!!**"

Dying soldiers and servants alike stumbled out of corners only to fall dead on the floor around her in broken heaps as she ran.

Blinded by tears she rounded a corner and didn't see a wire strung across the hall. Tripping she fell forward at speed, but heard a horrific tiny click on the way down. Just like the first. In fear she shoved *Sir Oinkin* toward the sound's direction this time.

"Knight's aegis!"

In a fraction of a second the front of the toy pig's face lit up with a red glyph, which brought up a large enough round shield of translucent red light to protect her from a blast at point blank range. Debris and fire impacted the shield shoving the pig back into her chest knocking the wind out of lungs, and threw her back into a wall. She was in immense pain when the world stopped spinning, but the flames hadn't touched her and the shrapnel hadn't shredded her. Dragging herself up in one piece thanks to the good knight she kept going.

Reaching the other end of the floor though it only got worse. She stopped at the foot of a pile of messily slaughtered guards. Their bodies sliced apart in a gory path all the way to the library. Limbs tossed about. Rib cages opened so their contents could be spread across the floor, the walls, and ceiling. Shattered corpses were hanged from beams by the guts of their fellows. Their faces, *what remained of faces*, either locked in twisted masks of terrifying pain and anguish, or instead carved up into bloody nightmarish exaggerated smiles.

She knew them. She'd seen them around, heard them laugh and mutter their problems among themselves. They had lived. Now they were simply mutilated meat spread from wall to wall. Another blast boomed somewhere back from where she had run from. She had to move on. She had to continue. A new burn flared through her spine as she cautiously tiptoed around the corpses.

The smell of blood. The sound of viscous fluids dripping. The unsteady feel of spilled slimy guts under her shoes. It was all ever so vaguely familiar. *Why?* She hadn't the slightest idea. But one word buried in her mind came forward as it had many times before. The only word to describe such a scene.

Death.

The thought threatened to open more pain within her skull which was most definitely not needed right now. She concentrated on reaching that library. On getting her next step on solid ground. On getting to Papa. On ignoring what felt like the moving of eyes twitching to follow her despite there being not an eyeball left to do so. On ignoring the whispers in her ears echoing the gasps of

dying men's thoughts. On not falling over into the broken reaching hands of what was once those alive.

.

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She looked up when a hand came down on her shoulder to find Tsumugu beside her. He had never looked so sad even in the funeral processions she'd seen from her window. With his head he motioned forward. Then backward. He had judged her will to do this at the cabin. There was no judgment here. He was asking if she could really go on or needed to leave. Wiping her eyes dry with her arm she shook her head and stepped forward. He didn't let go.

"Are you sure?"

"No."

But on she went. The group dismounted the cart, the ox was tied, and on they followed with various bits of equipment in hand. She led the procession through the gate into a cobblestone yard dotted with more burial mounds and followed the road as it turned right. What had once been gardens along the road were now overgrown scrub covered in stone fallen from the structures standing above. The stables, towers, store buildings, and so forth were all in varied states of destruction. Some were nothing more than fragmented shells that had been demolished violently. Others collapsed into themselves destroying anything, and anyone, unfortunate enough to be within when they burned.

She stopped by doorways and window frames to peer into here and there. When they had to go over rubble piles as no path around was accessible Tsumugu went ahead to check if they were sound with a long iron bar he'd taken with them. The road was followed along the outer wall until their path was firmly blocked with a whole cluster of buildings reduced to impassible terrain. To their right was the wall, and left the keep proper.

Tsumugu brought them to what had once been a small side entrance. Its portcullis still raised and rusting solid where it sat above. Carefully he pulled away some stone piled under it to reveal the heavy doors themselves were intact. Shoving the rod through an iron handle he braced against the other and shoved. It took two attempts and all three men present combined to eventually drag the screeching thing open. Light from above was able to just fill the entrance to the interior corridor that was, expectantly, burnt and ruined. The walls still covered in soot and ash that stretched on to depths beyond that remained a void of darkness.

"This one hadn't caved in while we were still trying to find survivors. I can't promise it hasn't somewhere deeper within since, or won't collapse as we go, but it should be a way through

if we stick to the right side."

Houka adjusted his glasses as he weighed their options.

"I know we brought a lantern, but a lantern."

Ryuko walked up between the two men and peered in.

"I can see."

"Any obstructions?"

"There's just a door off its top hinge hanging on the left."

"That if I remember right was sealed shut and wouldn't budge no matter what we did. It must have come loose with a shift in the stone."

Ryuko snapped her fingers and a small white light flew into the hall. As it went it illuminated an area just around it until it crashed into a far wall and fizzled out. As said the only thing sticking out was the door leaning over. Its mass still held by a bottom hinge. With a path to take Kinue brought up the lantern and lit it. She was going to hand it off to Tsumugu to lead the way until Ryuko started walking ahead.

"Milady?"

Ryuko muttered under her breath, pulled off her hoods, and light bloomed. From her hair, her eyes, and her pig. Red and white for the most part illuminated around her as she made careful steps forward. The procession followed. Houka joined in by lighting his staff to give them a third light source. When Ryuko reached a torch sconce still hanging on the wall she snapped her fingers to generate a another light to sit in it. The sound echoed.

What followed the echo made her pause.

The tiniest buzz of a sound came to her. Something low. Broken basic syllables. She looked around as it came and went in a loop like a hissing breeze. Until it stopped. Nobody else seemed to have noticed so she continued on.

Her next stop came when she reached the door and peered into what lay beyond. The far end of the room above had collapsed down at some point filling half the room. The front half by the door had its floor drop about a foot down. Otherwise it was mostly just burnt black as pitch. Once again the barest edges of voices tingled her ears. She stood there frowning until Tsumugu looked over her shoulder and saw the mounds on the floor gathered around the bottom of the door. Against his better judgment he asked her to toss a light in.

She complied letting loose a floating spark of white light.

And they both regretted it.

Among destroyed rags the pile was made of bodies. Long dead bones of young men not more than boys were all a mess against each other. Outlines scarcely distinguishable in what mummified mass still held the skeletons partly together. What few faces that could be seen locked in melting screams of decay. The door frame had been damaged sealing them inside. A beam that had fallen from the ceiling just inside the doorway kept the door itself from having smashed the bodies into the room whenever the top hinge had given up.

"Trapped."

"This was not your fault Ryu."

"Between a cave in and the fire in the hall..."

"Ryuko. We can't do anything for them now. It would be too risky to try and get in there. We have to keep moving."

Tsumugu tried to move Ryuko away from the door to keep her on track. She stood firm. There was only one group it could have been. They had been inseparable as they worked all day in the stables. She'd more than once heard the boys frolic through an open window during her studies and been so very jealous of their free time. And all that remained of them was forgotten in the dark of an abandoned corner. Their last moments the terror of the world falling into hell itself.

She had to move on. She wanted to. But she *couldn't*. She couldn't possibly ever just move on. Give up. *Relinquish her duty*. Not after this.

The dead were always just too damn loud.

Tsumugu had taken her arm to lightly pull her along. She stood up straight and yanked him back toward her. Her voice firm.

"Uncle."

"Ryu we--"

"I knew some of father's orders. Not one man was to ever be left behind. Not once. Not ever."

He stopped and stared at her.

"Ryu?"

"We are going to bring them with us to the yard."

He let go and after a moment realized where this was going. Her eyes like blue fire itself turned up toward him because of his lack of answer. She flicked her sword out and down through the remaining hinge. When the door began to fall toward her a panic erupted. Hands went to grab her. She growled through an incantation and before their eyes the mass of wood dispersed into smoke before it could touch her. From her irritated throat she almost broke into a yell.

"It *will* be done!"

Kinue pushed passed the rest to grab her shoulder.

"Ryu what on Earth!?" As her lantern came up so to did its light. She glanced in the doorway and stopped. "*Oh... Oh gods.*"

"Do we have blankets to spare Nanna?"

"Um, yes? But- *But...*"

She turned back to Tsumugu. He looked down at the pile, at her, and then to his sister's face who was also realizing what had been asked. It was a terrible way for this to happen, but he had fully expected this. She had harbored guilt her whole life. She was too stubborn to back down and too motivated to just let it go.

She was always going to demand taking responsibility for what she felt she had to.

Among the wild fields where she had fled she had long since crowned herself with bramble thorns.

"I have served. And I will continue to serve. You're right. Your will be done, *Kronprinzessin.*"

For the first time since her return she didn't cringe at the title. No remark. No excuse. No denial.

For different reasons behind them Satsuki's jaw couldn't clench harder.

From the moment the initial shock on the road had worn off a simmering anger had begun to boil within her. She had to remind herself several times that it was simply too long ago for her to have acted against Nui to prevent this. But how many more such places had ended up like this which she was unaware of? How many more lives had been lost? How many *more* had suffered as action was set aside for ever more planning and preparations?

Was this now that state of ironwood?

She was torn between wanting above all else to know for certain,

and never wanting to know just how cruel the world could be. The room now before her brought her up to a boil. While Tsumugu went back to the cart to get blankets Uzu tried to go out and get some air. She gripped him by the back of his hair hard enough to make him yelp, and dragged him back to finally face the room properly.

"You will not avoid this, do I make myself clear?"

"C-Crystal ma'am!"

They had collectively been forced to acknowledge that conflict and death were inseparable early in her campaigns, but *this*? All of *this*!? She ensured each of her knights burned the scene into their memories while the light lived. They would now forever be first hand witnesses to the atrocities committed here. Wars were fought against factions, not bloody populations. Even records from the crusades told of taking many captives. The masses of free and enslaved half elven people were descendants of *survivors*. The inquisition's darkest hours were known to be aggressively hostile. But this was leagues beyond the pale. This was an *extermination*.

All this committed in the name of claiming some fucking magic trinkets!?

In reflex she grasped the handle of her sword, what used to be a rather usual reaction was unfortunately painfully nauseating as realization dawned on her connecting dots.

How many of these people's last memories were of a very familiar blue glow cutting them down?

When Tsumugu returned with cloth that could suffice he rolled it out on the floor in front of the doorway. They had all heard Ryuko. The purpose was clear. And Tsumugu didn't have to ask. Satsuki put on her gloves and made her way down into the room before anyone could object to her volunteering for the grimmest of work.

Her knight's protests to her personally doing such work were shouted down with orders.

"Houka more light, Nonon get down here and help me lift. Uzu take a corner of the door and take what we bring up."

Nonon dropped in and ripped her own gloves out of a pocket so she could get to work. Together they tried to separate the bodies. Tsumugu took the other corner of the door and tried to get his little expertise on it, but there was just no earthly way to do it without making a mess. So they carefully extracted the corpse pile as a whole using the cloth and wrapped it once it had been heaved into the hall.

The smell alone was indescribable.

Made ready for transport Satsuki took up one end of it and ordered Uzu to take the other so they could carry it along between them. New mission undertaken the procession reached the end of the first hall where Ryuko stopped to stare into the dark once more. They could go right or left at the junction. Tilting her head she looked down both path's available. Her ears twitching still.

"Down the right on the direct route is clear to another bend left. **Wood?** Door bits about the floor."

Tsumugu confirmed that for her.

"yes. We managed to clear those looking for people."

"Down the left opens up to... To the main entrance hall."

"Lot of columns had been taken down in there by blasts." She stared for a while in that direction. It was the shortest path to the very heart of the castle. Tsumugu nudged her away from it. "I know what you're thinking, but the longer we stay the more we push our luck. We've *already* committed to far more than we set out to."

Mercifully the rooms were empty of prior occupants temporary or otherwise as said. The hall took them further down a series of bends until finally they were back outside through another destroyed door. Back on the road around the complex, and on the other side of the large pile that had blocked them.

Weaving around smaller piles of debris as they made their way Ryuko stopped again next in the middle of overgrown brush. She stared up and singled out a spot in particular. The glass was long gone, and a handful of ceiling beams had visibly fallen down, but her room looked to still be there. The large tree had sadly not survived. Its decaying limbs were barren where it always stood.

The large ones still surprisingly looked solid enough to hold her weight though. Which technically meant she had a way in that didn't involve collapsed stairwells. Not that such would have actually stopped her alone. She always had a way to slip through the place in any direction she wished obstacles be damned. She just hadn't yet gotten hold of even a single gem to make a new safety net.

But it was precisely that which captured her curiosity.

"Uncle?"

"yeah?"

"Did anyone make it to the third floor?"

"During the searches?"

"Yeah."

"Never. There wasn't a pinhole big enough to try even the second. Maybe we could have dug our way up, but disturbing anything that became structural was and still is a death sentence."

"So, nobody could have gotten up there at all."

"Near zero odds. Where is this going?"

If nobody else had ever gotten up to that floor, if the floor was still there, and if the fires had not ravaged the place completely there was a chance. A chance of recovering a rather valuable resource supply. She glanced around at various windows along the same floor. All were broken, but only *most* were burned. As she surveyed the area she finally noticed Nanna's slight trembling. The woman was trying very hard to keep a strong face.

Ryuko looked down at her knight and walked over to her.

"Nanna?"

"What is it?"

She held her pig out to be taken.

"Sir Oinken is the bravest, most dependable, knight. He protected me without fail. Could you watch him for me?"

Kinue fought back tears as she gently took the pig and cradled it in her arms.

"O-Of course. But, don't you..."

"I have means. And because we are here I can maybe secure more. I will need my, uh, hand free for that."

"How?"

She pointed up at her bedroom windows.

"Supplies."

"You intend to get in there?"

She nodded, and ran toward the tree. And to the assembly's astonishment kept running. Up the trunk she went pushing up with her feet. With her working hand she managed to keep her moment going upwards by pulling at limbs as she just went up and up through the branches. The only snag in her plan was that the frames still were riddled with broken shards of glass all around them. There was no other way. With a leap she vanished in a plume

of black smoke by the windows.

After a moment another puff of black erupted and Ryuko stood inside the room.

The Kinagase's shared a look of first disbelief, and then a deep understanding.

"Honestly that girl."

"Are you telling me it was the tree that let her escape all the time!?"

"Evidently *somebody* may have taught her one too many things out in the woods *hm?*"

Tsumugu sputtered before throwing his hands up in defeat.

Inside Ryuko found the place savaged by the elements. Soft materials had rotted away. Most of her things destroyed by years of exposure. But as hoped not fire. Very carefully she navigated the creaking floor mindful of the rather plentiful dangers involved, ducked under fallen beams, and made her way to what remained of a wardrobe. She grasped a handle and tried to pull it open.

The hinges shattered into rusty bits and the solid oak door fell.

She could only sidestep and let it hit the floor with a crash. Despite her heart hammering in her throat mercifully nothing else fell. Several voices outside called out to her all the same demanding to know what happened. She yelled.

"I'm okay! Just a door!"

She pulled out her scissor and prepared to cut the other door free so it could fall straight down. Until she saw a white light to her right. She turned to face the door to the hall and found the white bird had returned. Its talons gripped on the broken frame of windows that used to line the far side of the hall. They overlooked an inner courtyard of a sort made to let light down into the interior spaces. She once again felt that stare upon her, but it took off leaving behind only frost where it had stood and once more disappeared.

Not wishing to regard that as anything other than a hallucination she continued with her plan to slash the second wardrobe door off its hinges. It came down in a controlled fall and from there she shoved it over safely against the wall. Wardrobe open she further ignored the clothes that would no longer fit her, drawers of varied unimportant things she couldn't stop to investigate, and everything else to be found other than a small solid chest at the very bottom. That alone she dragged into the light. She touched

her hand to the front and as her father had taught her used a cast to unlock it like many times before. Lid free she flipped it open to find the velvet lining inside perfectly fine.

As suspected the almost empty interior was just as it had been left.

The only thing inside was a brass handle affixed to what looked like the bottom. She pulled at it, and dragged up a rack of little drawers much taller than the chest was deep. Only the finest of her father's work all perfectly preserved. She shoved it back down and closed it up. Awkwardly she managed to pick it up and made her way to the window. Because of what it was she couldn't put it into her cloak.

There was only one safe way to get this down.

She made one more brief dash through existence and reappeared in the garden where she placed the chest down on an old stone bench. Kinue went up to inspect it with her.

"That? It was still there?"

"Yeah. We can take it on our way back Nanna. After..."

She gestured to the blanket wrapped body bundle picked up once more by its two bearers so they could continue.

"Of course."

From there the only major obstacle was finding stable footing among what piles they had to cross over to reach the end of the road. A wrought iron gateway at the front of a walled in field of overgrowth tucked deep within the castle grounds. In the middle of this field stood a black chapel singed about its edges, but mostly standing.

Tall grass waved in a breeze that broke against stone pillars. Proper headstones in a private graveyard on castle grounds. Tsumugu and Houka hacked a path through to the doors, and to an open spot of ground near the front gate. In the meantime Ryuko just stared at the building with a deep frown. Her ears shifting slightly in tiny twitches. Having reached their destination Satsuki took up a place beside her to survey in the scene. Kinue went to the other to put an arm around her shoulders.

For the first time in hours it felt like Satsuki found her voice.

"She's... She's here then? A chapel to Mors."

Kinue answered in Ryuko's silence.

"Yes. Among those who were closest to his majesty that... This is

where his most honored were buried no matter where they hailed or fell. Brave souls who served in life with all the life they had to give. Yes, land within a battlement's walls is rather valuable in many respects. But he could not find land worth more so than this. No land was ever as valuable as lives. Es-..." Kinue's grip on the toy strengthened as a single tear finally broke free down her cheek. "Especially those that were lost."

"How does a man build a kingdom without valuing land? Without land you have no resources, no base, no room to maneuver."

"By building up people instead."

Satsuki realized that Kinue wore a ring on the intended finger for a wedding band as the woman thumbed at it. It was not hard to figure what that meant given the lack of such a figure, or any mention of, at the cabin. Everywhere she looked it felt like the tragedy of the north just keep getting deeper and deeper.

When the plot had been made accessible various hands helped dig with shovels, and magic. The burying process itself was a simple and straightforward affair. While the dirt was being replaced Satsuki left the yard to find a stone though. It was an easy enough task to find a suitable slab among the many that had tumbled down. She pulled out her sword to her knight's shock, and used it to hack at the slab until it was a proper simple shape to match the others in the yard. Bashes, sparks, and loud metallic protests be damned. When she was done Houka came over to help her move it. He whispered to her as they muscled it into position at the head of the grave.

"Lady Satsuki your sword is a finely crafted implement--"

"Of an origin hellishly foul. I could not fathom a more fitting end to its service than if it should break in the process of *burying these children.*"

Ryuko finished the work by using her half scissor to scratch the names of the deceased into the stone.

She had remembered every single one.

Burial complete, and at least these few broken whispers finally silenced, they continued toward the original goal of this trip. Once more the men had to pry large metal doors open with the metal bar. Once more it audibly protested its use. And also once more they managed to get it open.

None entered. They waited for Ryuko to start her walk again. On shaking legs she marched forward. Slowing as she neared the place of worship. She stopped standing in the doorway, peering into the chapel that it seemed time forgot.

Light filtered in through stained glass windows to put colors upon dark pews and polished black stone. Predominantly red. The fires and destruction that had raged across the castle had somehow not made it through this one building. Decorations, candles, and delicate metalwork were only defaced by a dust from age.

She looked at the far wall beyond an altar. At the largest section of stained glass above it. And at a particular section of marble to the right of the altar set in the wall. It was a grave. One among the many around. One among the many of thousands now around. But it was the one she knew.

Shuffling forward her shoes left prints in the dust. Her lights still reflecting off surfaces as she made her all the way to the slab. With swipe of her hand the dust was wiped away leaving a mirror like surface to let her see her own face. And glowing details. She slapped the stone with a fist and crushed her eyes shut to make the glow go away. *The glow of the damned.*

Kinue came up to beside her and placed a hand on her upper back to rub assuring circles there.

"Your father said she made the choice to bring you into this world no matter what. They knew what would happen after a point, and she made this decision. She would be proud of you Ryu. Of the woman you grew to be despite what might feel like the whole world bearing down on your shoulders."

The rest of the procession had filtered in and looked about. Tsumugu took a seat near the front of the pews. Satsuki sat next to him to whisper a question.

"It was not mentioned previously, but how did her mother die?"

"Her mother..."

In the relative silence of the chapel sounds carried well. And Ryuko could hear better than them all. She stood up straight and cleared her nose. She spoke aloud, so her voice would spread through the building.

"My mother was killed. Satsuki. *Murdered.*"

Kinue made a pained face. But bit her tongue before calling out herself. To Satsuki Tsumugu waved her forward, as evidently his lady was going to answer herself. She got up and made her way over.

"By whom?"

Ryuko spoke toward the slab.

"...Me."

It took Satsuki a minute to carefully word a response.

"She died in childbirth?"

Ryuko shook her head.

"No. *Not from it.*"

"Then..."

"Her life was doomed the moment my heart began to beat."

"Ryuko, losing one's mother to natural-"

"*There was nothing natural about what I did to-... t-to...*" She had to stop to steady her words. "A mortal woman was never meant to carry a *Fae* child. A half human woman has no way to protect themselves from the indiscriminate destruction *from within* that a Nymph creates. I... I ripped her life apart. *Literally*. Every line of life flow within her body was twisted, and torn, and... a-and devoured. By *me*. The minute I was born our connection was severed, and she was dead. *I've been killing people before I was even born, Satsuki!*"

Kinue tried to shush her.

"Ryu, please. This is the last thing you need to do to yourself. *She wouldn't want you to do this to yourself.*"

She let herself be moved back from the slab before she could hit it again, but stopped to turn her glowing eyes full of pain toward Satsuki.

"I killed to be born. I tried to help someone dying, and ran into a war that took the lives of every person buried within the miles around us. I tried to run away from the world that was on fire only to find people that wanted to kill me *at best*. I tried so hard, *so very hard*, to just live. But no matter what I do people just kept coming for blood, and would only ever leave when blood has been spilled... So, *tell me again*. Now you seem to see at least some fraction of the sheer devastation that is the natural disaster I am! Tell me before *my mother's* grave. Tell me before the corpse of the first blood on my hands. Tell me with all the dead that were consumed in the blast outside Ironwood. Tell me that a potential eternity to live with this moment, that this never ending constantly repeating weight, among *all* the other *deaths* on my fractured conscience *IS PRIVILEGE!*" Her hoarse shout echoed through the chapel. The rest of the assembled began to figure this trip had something to do with the two of them talking, and Kinue couldn't bear to let it go on.

"My lady please. What on earth is this about?"

Ryuko looked down at her hands and clenched them into fists.

"The Lady insists to know who I am."

"Ryu? You are you. What- what else would you be?"

Satsuki filled in there.

"A fae who's lived more than once. The Inheritors were called such by the elves for possessing a Fae soul. She bears visions, memories, of the past. Events, battles, interactions with others. All of which in ways and times for it to have been impossible in this life. One of her great strengths is the accumulated knowledge brought forth in this time. So I asked, who is she? She decided that we needed to come here to answer that."

Ryuko walked out of grasp to stand in front of the altar. Both Kinue and Tsumugu tried to stop her but she was standing atop the stone table before they could reach her.

"Ryu you're going to fall!"

"You want to know Satsuki? You want to know who I refuse to accept to be!?"

From within her dress she pulled out her scissor and extended it to full size. With a shout she hurled it down onto the floor with a clatter, and then pointed up at the stained glass behind her.

"You've got your two hints. Figure it out!"

There in glass was a figure robed in black. With eyes in the black of its hood piercing blue. In its skeletal black hand a red blade. Long and translucent, said to be made of frozen blood.

A cold wind blew through the chapel robbing the air of any heat and billowed out her cloak.

And Satsuki's eyes went wide, stunned.

But Ryuko's own eyes snapped to the doorway when a metal clack hit stone before any more words could be said. Turning to see what what it was about the assembled froze. Jaws fell as they collectively watched a half naked woman made of white light in limited armor slowly walked into the chapel on armored high heels. The specter's head encased in a white helm with armored tall ears off its sides, otherwise topped by a pair of white antlers. The only holes in the face were two slits about the eyes glowing the brightest lights of all. About their shoulders was a translucent pelt of some kind studded with decorative medals. About their waist hung a northern war horn on belt straps. With a sweep of ethereal gauntlets a floating broadsword appeared. Hilt grasped

the figure continued to march up the center aisle toward the alter. Every step a loud clang of metal that echoed back from the walls and left the ground where she stepped covered in frost. More such wisps of cold smoked off her form.

Ryuko leapt down, seized her blade, and screamed at the top of her lungs.

"RUN!"

Around her a swirl of black erupted, cracked and warped. Her screams of pain rang as the wind buffeted the assembled back away from the center of the building. It ended just as the figure in white rose its hand to swing down at her. It was met in a crash of sparks by the scissor taken up and raised in both arms. The impact sent whips of more wind out buffeting the spectator's to this dual.

Ryuko's armor while summoned was riddled with cracks. Every split in the plates erupting in bursts of steam. Her left arm while now mobile was clearly being kept back as she favored her right, which was just able to repel the two handed swings of the broadsword.

But despite these limitations the swings quickly became a dance. An art of combat both terrifying in its speed and complexity. Yet also mesmerizing.

Ryuko pushed to turn two strikes into glancing sparks off her blade before she dropped low to sweep at the specter's legs. The counter was blocked by the head of a long handled hand ax which materialized in a fall. A white hand took hold of it, took a step back, and swung the two weapons around their wrists.

Ryuko screamed through her pain. With every ounce of her strength she brought her left arm up to grip the lower half of her scissor's handle. By mental command the weapon once again transformed to extend even further until it finally stopped at full extension. With a twist of her upper body she leveled her impressively long blade to bring its point forward at her eye level. One heeled foot swept the ground to produce a grind of metal on stone. Then she pushed off with the other in a charge that sent them into a frightfully chaotic melee once more. Beyond the steam pouring out though, beyond the multitude of movements far more superfluous than any of the knights had ever witnessed in a spar, Satsuki managed to look at how Ryuko was fighting. And looked down at her own sword.

It was some distant offshoot of what looked like the Plain's style of swordsmanship. But the more she studied the more she realized that every single movement being made was tactically complete. There was never an opening shown where a weapon could exploit no matter how odd the movements seemed. The red sword just kept twisting, stabbing, and singing through the air to create a

perfect defense.

More perfect than the Plain's style.

And she recalled what Ryuko had said as they overlooked the city.

Was Plain's style a distant offshoot of *Fae swordsmanship*?

Unsheathing Bakuzan Satsuki charged into the fray.

Satsuki circled to attack from the back. Her swing was cleanly blocked by the sword, but it gave Ryuko an opening around the ax. She slashed across the ghost's legs bringing them down with a crash. With her armored foot she kicked the figure aside sending them hurtling into a side wall.

It didn't take long for them to get back up and charge.

But Ryuko was ready.

She dropped to her back, shoved her blade forward to let the ghost impale itself by the gut, and when the body fell atop her she kicked again. The ghost was sent up over her into the other wall with another crash. Satsuki helped her up to her feet, but the battle was over.

The ghost had been pinned to the wall.

It dropped its weapons which shattered with the sound of breaking glass before they evaporated.

Ryuko stumbled forwards and fell as the energy to fight left her. Her armor truly done burst into black smoke that left her in her dress and cloak once more kneeling on the ground. But unlike the usual process of dropping her armor bleeding holes were left all about her limbs that struggled to keep her up. The specter didn't seem adversely affected despite being held off the ground by a blade through its body. Being still armed Satsuki stepped forward to get between them as Ryuko was helped up once more by Tsumugu. She yelled from his arms.

"W-Why? You aren't here! You aren't real!"

In answer their ears rang with a voice's echo. The breathy words incredibly ornate and foreign as Sylv could be.

"This one... is not precisely here nor there, yet neither is thou. So why does thou level such accusations... when matters more pressing burn thy most precious commodity?"

White light bloomed as the shape of the figure changed. Skin was covered and armor melted away until they were left wearing heavily weathered robes. Her translucent hands reached out of large

ethereal sleeves torn and riddled with rips to grasp the blade handle for just a moment. The figure lost its solid nature long enough to fall to the floor and land with another clack. She grasped her skirt layers at either side, crossed one leg before the other to make an X of their legs, and curtsied.

From hood to heels stood the figure of a soul that had suffered tremendously. Despite both eyes being a bright white light the left half of their face was a skeletal mass fragmenting endlessly, but never truly dissolving away. Both tall ears were kinked in spots but present poking out the hood. Her chest bore marks of being pierced by weapons round, angular, narrow, great, and small. The patterns which adorned the material were barely recognizable beyond the damage.

"Forgive the test, old friend... This one simply wished to know... You are on the right path now... You are so very close to thyself... Cycles tick on. Cycles thou are in short supply of. Burn thy mortal coil before its too late and awaken. Burn thy mortal blood and soar again before thy husk fails, and thy chance is gone."

Rising up the ax once more materialized. The knights were ready this time. Weapons were unsheathed, a spell was prepared to cast, and Nonon set to pin this... Ghost fae to the wall once more. But none of them were the woman's target.

She rose the weapon, aimed for a spot at the other corner of the front of the chapel from her, and threw it. Spinning it sailed through the air until it crashed into the slab that was Ryuko's Mother's grave.

"NO!"

Ryuko struggled in Tsumugu's hands but the damage was done.

And the results were extremely unexpected.

The stone shattered from the impact as well as the ax. Jagged chunks fell and toppled to reveal that the burial vault was not only empty, it was the entrance to a hallway going down. The ghost walked toward the new exit as the knights lowered their arms in shock.

"This one has been bound here, to you, for a long while. Waiting... Plenty of cycles to prod about seeking what ways one could aid thine return... Walls of stone mean nothing to the soul..." She turned back to address Ryuko directly once more. ***"If thou truly wishes to avoid thy pains there is only one way... The husk cannot bear thy existence forever... And neither can we three others bear the ravages of the void forever... There is something massive in the wind... This one cannot tell of what or why, but it heralds dread like nothing before... Perhaps it is for the best we***

four are left in this Third Era." The form began to lose focus. She stared down at her hands as they began to disintegrate into snowflakes. ***"It seems this one has run out of time for now... Delve on. Before it's too late. Cursed fate beckons us unto the breach once more... Mors."***

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Stone battlements shook from the munitions, fire, and lightning that could reach them, but not one soldier left their post. The sky above their heads boomed and whizzed from the round the clock return fire from Honnouji's Gun Corp. They simply huddled deeper into their cover and waited. Their Field Commander stalwart and unwavering in the face of this unprecedented onslaught had his heavy metal boot on a low section of parapet. From which he surveyed the scene with an unchanging grimace.

For the seventh day in a row boats of every kind imaginable made approach towards Honnouji under the cover of a hailstorm of fire. Each and every one bringing combatants willing to do anything they could to take the fight ashore. Kill any and all found along their way to seizing the fort. He would have liked nothing more than to sneer at the impossible notion that anyone could succeed in assaulting this island.

But those small wooden craft came from an army that grew by the day. Thousands upon possibly tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of bandits, cutthroats, and raiders that had established camps up and down the shore of the river. Thousands of assembled banners high above what had once been communities of decent honest peoples.

With a concerning amount of cannon to bring to bear.

They had managed to evacuate many civilians from the surrounding area to the island itself, but only just. Every field, every town, and every dock had been seized in one violent push he could only hope the rest of the locals had managed to escape from. The island itself was all that remained. And seemingly all the world's filth were converging together to burn it down. Slaughter the defenders down to the last man, woman, and child.

When water craft reached the final ring of approach buoys he raised an armored fist to bring a whistle to his face. He blew hard into it to produce a shrill note that echoed out before it was joined by those of unit leaders from one side of the island to the other.

Flashes of light and fire lit up from near the top of the island's central keep on cue. The massive bronze bombards of Honnouji, the jewel of her majesty's stone crown, finally awoke to answer the many small mortars in opposition. They barked out a series of bellowing roars sending arcing shots into the sky which struck true to completely obliterate targets with explosive shot.

Troops then rose up to point bows and staves down from the lowest encircling wall and let loose everything they had to join the cannon barrage. Anything that had somehow survived the initial volleys sailed into a deadly rain that ripped bodies inside them to pieces. Shoddy wooden crafts were turned into floating graves which were then broken by more cannon fire, and sunk to the bottom of the river like the many before them.

Attack repulsed successfully another wave of whistles sounded off from the unit commanders after the final approach was clear. Satisfied Gamagori ordered for medics to go make their rounds, and for the next troop rotation to have all eyes on any stragglers that attempted to swim the distance.

Before leaving the wall though he turned his eyes north. He knew his Lady could handle herself, but the fact that this assault came now after she had left in secret was deeply disturbing in its implications. Either a traitor was within, or someone had them all under a magnifying glass. The very fact that this force had the audacity to outright assault an imperial fortification was already troubling on its own. Where they had all come from so quickly doubly so. Their firepower... The list went on.

Walking through the water district he passed runners organizing checks on mortar damage to buildings, frightened people seeking reassurement that they would live, and those tasked with keeping the army itself operational through it all. All of them trying to stop what they were doing to regard him as he passed. Each time he would put out his hand to make them stop trying to salute, and simply asked that they continue to fulfill any duties asked of them to the letter. So long as everyone did their part they would make it through this.

Along his way back up to the central keep a bespectacled woman ran up to him carrying an armful of documents and papers.

"Sir! Sir! *Commander!*"

"Quartermaster Ogure." Giving her a nod he motioned her to follow by his side and took the offered bundle. Talking as he carefully glanced them over one by one. She was nervous, more so than usual at least. He wanted to chalk it up to the siege rattling walls day and night, but she had served as the army's chief of logistics through multiple campaigns now. This was the first time she had shown such concern. "What is all this?"

"Sir, reports sir. Supply manifests, munitions stores, medicinal stocks, usage projections--"

"I can see that, why do I need this now?"

"*Sir.*" Holding onto his arm she stopped him, redirected them out of the busy street they were on, and turned them off into a side way clear of traffic. She checked both behind and in front of them before motioning him to lean in so she could talk lower. "I've been tracking how everything is being used. We are going to have a *problem* at the current rate, and soon."

"What? How? We keep sufficient stores to ensure even the longest of potential sieges can be simply waited out. Long enough that even with full civilian compliment legions at the other end of the Empire should be able to march here in time to aid us."

"That's just it sir, I've triple checked myself down in the store vaults to make sure of that. *What we had on paper is not what we actually have!*"

Taking a deep breath he crushed half of the material he held in one of his hands. Glancing around he quietly but *firmly* ordered her to show him *immediately*.

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Ducking through a stone doorway they entered a series of passages leading below ground. They were a dedicated path for moving supplies where they needed to go across the district, and lit by carefully placed skylights and oil lamps. Each of the three defense rings had its own such isolated network only normally traversed by the logistics corp. With lamps in hand they came to a stretch full of heavy wooden doors. Pulling out a ring of large iron keys Ogure picked one and opened it, then the door ten meters to its right, and then a third further down where she waited after the tumblers clicked loudly.

He entered the first and saw nothing out of the ordinary, until he investigated deeper. Crates full of grain sacks only filled the first third of the room. They had been stacked to make the place seem significantly more full than it actually was, leaving the room out of sight from the door completely empty. He rushed to the second which was arranged the same as the first. After entering the last he was furious to find it identical to the others. She followed him in this time, pushing the door mostly closed behind her before walking up to him staring at empty stone walls.

"*The rest?*"

"The same. No one could have just removed it all without someone noticing. *Someone* must have been tampering with inbound supply shipments for the last number of weeks."

"When did you--"

"Only after coming down two days ago myself, again, just to be sure of what we had. I've checked every store room I could and they are more or less all the same story. We have maybe a quarter of capacity actually filled. I'd have notified command in full, but I figured a panic from such a report spreading wouldn't help. So right to the top I went."

This was not just a problem, it was a catastrophic blow to their chances of survival. A traitor was most assuredly somewhere among the ranks. Multiple to have pulled this off.

"Who was in charge of overseeing stock acceptance over the winter?"

"I took care of it myself like every winter I am available to the garrison."

"And what was happening then?"

Setting the metal and glass device in his grasp down he went over to a crate to start feeling around its lid. Every one of them was nailed shut to keep out vermin, not that the island ever had such a problem thanks to Houka's careful oversight. It was a simple to enforce preventative measure that went far in preventing spread of possible infestation. He pried at it with his gauntlet clad hands as she went on.

"You have my word nothing was out of the ordinary under my watch! It must have happened when I resumed general oversight of the day to day provisions and delegated intake down the chain."

After wrenching a corner of the crate free he stopped for a moment. That couldn't be right. When Lady Satsuki returned with her immediate entourage to the garrison Inumuta had resumed his own *duties*. While he himself traveled to where their Lady needed eyes and ears directly, he was in charge of those tasked with literally overseeing everything. The scouting corp, the small mage corp, the record keepers, and the very land around the army itself to know everything going on that could possible hinder them. Both inside and out.

In order to keep the rats out he had some of his nondescript *helping hands* scour the storage vaults every spring, and check every boat full of supplies that came in. If someone had been shorting shipments it could not have happened until Houka was out, and his command switched to purely defensive scouting. It had not been long and only one shipment had come before the attack.

And it was not grain.

Continuing in his prying he had a terrible feeling in his gut he hoped was dead wrong. One that only worsened when a metallic noise pinged as he tore another nail free of wood.

"Maiko who was put in charge of receiving the shipments, crating them down, and overseeing the intake?"

While she started listing off names he noted she was slowly pacing around, but he kept working. Finally getting a second corner off she abruptly stopped both.

"Commander? What are you doing?"

"Checking to make sure what crates we have are actually full as well."

He also noted the relief in her voice.

"Ah, of course. I'll find a few people I know we can trust to do the same. Shall I continue?"

"Please."

While her back was turned toward him he slipped his arm under the open half of the lid. Feeling around until one of his fingers found a piece of heavy parchment sitting on top of the sacks inside. While pretending to use that arm to leverage the wooden panel he slipped the paper down to the open side of the box and peeked in.

Scanning the item placed there by the crew that took in the shipment he found the date of receiving.

In December.

Which meant this room had been filled in the winter.

Tilting his head from side to side when she finished her list and she turned back toward him, he nodded before releasing the lid. Making sure to push the record sheet back into place as he pulled his arm out.

"This one is full as far as I can tell. So that is good news at least."

"But we have a great many mouths to feed. Even if they are all full and we cut to half or quarter rations even, we are only going to last so many weeks at best. And that is just food. We're short on almost everything. If we don't get reinforcements soon sir we won't survive!"

Standing up straight he eyed her.

"What are you suggesting, Quartermaster?"

"Respectfully Commander... From what I see there is only one way out that we can guarantee on our own. We don't know how far down the river they are watching. If we could move people under cover of darkness as quickly as possible though we might be able to save--"

"And abandon this fort to the scum of the earth?"

"Forts can be rebuilt, men cannot be raised from the dead! Yes, we would be losing supplies, munitions, cannon... *Oh gods the cannons...* B-But we could retake it later if not replace it all!"

There was no way they could get everyone loaded onto what few boats they had. Multiple trips for each boat equally as unlikely under the eyes and arms of the opposition. And even if the former could be achieved allowing the strongest fortification in the whole north half of the Empire to fall, *intact*, was out of the question.

And Maiko should already know this. Yet was rather keen on forcing his hand toward ordering a full evacuation. She had also kept her clasped hands out of his sight for almost the entirety of her listing.

"How fast can you assemble these trusted few to search? How many hands? This can't get out."

"Of course sir. For such an important task I can definitely count on three individuals, and they should all be around. Shall I inform the lieutenants?"

"Not yet. I need to know what we've got for sure."

The eagerness in her voice was the same she had years ago when Lady Satsuki had put her in charge of overseeing her legion's supply lines. Reaching for his lamp he pretended to inspect its glass, while using it to look at a reflection from over his shoulder.

The glint of a short knife being re-sheathed as she left the room was unmistakable. Steeling his nerves he walked out and waited in the hallway for her to return. Within minutes she was back with three varied individuals. Two lower level men from logistics and a girl from the Mess.

Two dock workers and someone the cooks would send down to have things retrieved.

On Maiko's suggestion they all entered the first room, door closed to prevent any random passersby to know what they were doing. No sooner than lamps could be put down he was upon them. He smashed the two men's heads together to knock them out cold and threw one of them into the girl as she tried to reach for a pocket toppling her.

"Commander what are you doing!?"

Marching toward Maiko she panicked, catching her easily he grabbed her heavy shirts and hauled her up off the floor. Holding her at arms length she kicked at him, then swung the knife in her grasp into his arm. Slipping into a space on the inside of his elbow it was fortunately caught by the cloth and chain-mail beneath.

Swinging her to the right her head hit a crate making her drop the weapon. Dazed she struggled feebly while the other girl got free of the crumpled body on top of her.

"M-Maiko!"

"Plan B!"

The cooks' assistant went for a lantern. Undoing the latch to the oil supply she tried to throw it at him, he threw Maiko at her while booming as loud as he could.

"OGURE! YOU HAVE CONSPIRED AGAINST HONNOUJI!!!"

The two woman crashed together on the floor, under a swath of oil. Oil that lit up as soon as the lantern itself hit the ground and shattered releasing its flaming wick. They screamed as it enveloped them.

Grabbing up the two men slowly coming to he once again bashed their heads to knock them out, then smashed them together again for good measure, before hurling them at the door with enough force to destroy it. Marching forward the two unconscious men were strewn out in the hall. Next he grabbed the two women desperately trying to shed burning clothes.

Ignoring the fire as it spread to the wall of crates beside them he grabbed their necks and hoisted them up. Exiting the room he also disregarded others who had come to figure out what was going on. He threw the assistant into the far door, putting out the fires on her and cracking the wood she hit. Next he threw the still shrieking Ogure. Again the fire was gone, but she crashed straight through the broken wood and landed inside the dark storeroom while trailing smoke.

Stepping over crumpled unconscious forms to the door's remnants he yelled again.

"Why!? WHY HAVE YOU DONE THIS!?"

Entering the space he could not see much, but it was apparent that this store room was at least somewhat more full than those three across from it. Continuing forward he reached the far wall, and the burnt woman slumped against it. Reaching down to grab her again he noticed a new glove on her hand a second too late.

She sprung up with a shriek and grabbed him with it. Over her knuckle a purple sigil lit up, followed by a skin burning storm of lightning that arced out all over him. Grunting as the shocks found there way to his skin he grit his teeth to keep standing. He was rendered unable to move by muscle spasms. Status confirmed she started laughing maniacally. Her eyes bloodshot and deranged in the light of lightning bolts.

"The Princess is a haughty bitch, and the throne is filled by an uncaring sow that spawned her! The only one you can ever count on is yourself! I will not be someone's lackey! I will be rich, I WILL HAVE THE POWER! I have been waiting for this opportunity for years! AND ALL YOU HAD TO DO WAS LEAVE YOU IDIOT! I'll kill you for this!"

"No....ne..."

"What was that? I CAN'T HEAR YOU!!!"

Closing her grip down on his wrist her smile grew wider. Until he managed to reach out with his left gauntlet and grabbed her other arm. With the circle complete the energy found a new shortest path to the ground, *though her*.

"No one... will BESMIRCH LADY SATSUKI!"

Crying out in agony she fell to her knees as the arcs intensified through her chest. Slowly standing up to his own full height as the enchanted glove ran out of power he grabbed her by the face, and proceeded to slam her skull back into the stone wall hard enough to shut her up for a good while.

Panting for air as the feeling returned to numb skin he knelt down to check her for a pulse and more potential *magical surprises*. Dragging both unconscious bodies out into the hall proper he personally checked that all of them were alive. When a squad of troops alerted to his yelling finally turned up he calmly gave them orders.

"Get me a platoon, and rope. Maiko Ogure and her cohorts have acted to commit treason against this legion. As of this moment she is hereby stripped of her command until we get to the bottom of this. All the accused's possessions are to be searched and confiscated. All stock rooms are to be opened and contents accounted for. Those under her former command brought in for

interrogation, and four cells in the tower prepared."

Those troops that had responded initially were confused, but put his orders into motion. Armed with pry-bars dozens of men and women set to work while the logistics corp was brought in its entirety to the keep for questioning.

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Through the afternoon Gamagori alternated between retaking his position atop the wall, and personally interrogating anyone even remotely connected to the four known perpetrators. By nightfall two more waves had been repelled, and he received a somewhat relieving report that only those three rooms he had been brought to had been emptied of their stores as such. The rest while not fully stocked as anticipated still held at least three quarters of what they thought they had before. After a search of the accused's quarters secret correspondence detailing troop and supply movements, tactical information, promised rewards for the four by name for defecting, and a rough schedule of Lady Satsuki's own movements to and from the fort were found.

Disturbingly, a few were signed with sigils the scouting corp could not recognize as in use by any known warlords or criminal organizations across the continent.

The documents were bundled securely at his request.

As the moon rose he had all the evidence he needed to hold an execution. But he went up into the keep, went to the dungeon, and sat down in a chair facing Maiko's cell. Her uniform replaced with metal shackles to ensure she had no means of escaping. He waited for her to wake up, and for her to look up at him directly, before he spoke.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Maiko?"

The woman only spit towards him through broken teeth.

He continued.

"I respected you. I respected your ability to organize Men, your prudence in taking action when called for, and disciplined shrewdness in general decision making. Not a man in this legion ever went a night on an empty stomach. Not a man went without wraps for his feet. I thought I knew you. *I thought I could trust you.* Do you have any remorse for what you have set in motion? Any remorse for the eleven people who have so far died in this siege, and what may very well be many more over the coming days, after they had placed their faith in you?"

Leaning back up against the wall she stared at him. His face was dark in the shadow of a torch's light up and behind his head, but the lines visible were hardened into a recognizable scowl. Not of anger, but of disappointment. She realized he wasn't going anywhere until he got an answer.

"The only remorse I have... is not killing the Princess's oversize *man-bitch* when I had the chance."

"That's all? Even after the southern campaign? The children in Fujian? The ones who heard we were low on fruit and organized themselves to help by foraging in the wild to give you baskets in thanks? The girls that looked to you as a guiding model of what a woman could be? *What would you say to those kids now?*"

Silence was his answer. He nodded once, got up to retrieve the torch, and turned to leave. Knocking at the door to the individual cell block he had to wait for it to be unbarred. Feeling her spite filled eyes still following him he answered the glare without looking back.

"If that is how you truly feel even after all we have done, then there is nothing more that could change your mind. And in the present we find ourselves there is no room in this legion for traitors who value gold more than blood... *Goodbye Miss Ogure.* Your services will no longer be required."

She remained silent as the door was locked behind him.

Going back to his post he gave one last order for the mage corp to refresh all defensive wards, before temporarily retiring to his quarters for the night. With a small hammer and chisel he worked for another hour before turning in.

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For their crimes of conspiracy against Honnouji, treason against the Crown, and attempted assassination of a commanding officer Maiko Ogure, and her three associates, were hanged at dawn. The deed carried out from four gallows erected in full view of the southern shore.

Instead of being taken down as a small number of observers anticipated Honnouji's banner, a shining white shooting star pointed up on a field of royal blue, hoisted far above the tallest peak of stone so as to touch the heavens themselves still defiantly flew.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a rough year. Really rough month. Here's hoping for a better 2022.

edit; correcting errors as I catch them. This is what happens when you have too many drafts.

From a dusty basement

Chapter Summary

A Winter contingency

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Once stones had settled the only audible noises in the chapel came from the chaotic breaths of the assembled, and drips of black off Ryuko's lone hand raised toward the open tomb. Open empty tomb. She shuffled out of Tsumugu's hands now soaked in her blood, shuffled by Satsuki standing in halfway of a guarding position, and found herself to be an angry turbulent vortex of emotions. With what remained of her strength she reached the tomb. What was supposed to be a tomb.

"Where... What is this!? Where is Gudrun Matoi!?"

Her pierced legs refused to carry her any further. She fell to her knees and angrily stared down into the empty dark that was supposed to contain a body. A casket. Something. *Anything*. Not the remains of frost upon smooth stone stairs from someone that *wasn't* supposed to be there. Nothing remotely close to even the entrance to a lower burial vault was here.

Just lies.

Adrenaline that had flooded her veins and pushed her to the last desperate defense left her. Both legs were now shot. Her left arm was hanging limp at her side. Her back burned from holes drilled down to her spine. Her mess of extensive injuries finally caught up to her. Despite it all she still defiantly kept herself up off the black floor with her last remaining limb in working order. If only just. She paid no mind to all the noisy activity that kicked off behind her.

Everything? Was everything all lies?

No. It couldn't be everything. But how much was?

How far did the lie go down?

How far down would she have to go to know the truth?

She stared down at the cold spot below her palm. From side to side she swept the dust away to find her own face staring back in the reflection. Twinkling little tears of frustration gathered at the edges of the blue in her eyes. Blue that was already fading back to her pupils. It was not long until only two final bright sapphire embers were left that refused to be extinguished in a sea of gray.

She refused to be extinguished.

She refused to not know because it was pissing her off.

Tears now poured down her cheeks to splash on the reflection. Light distorting both in her eyes and in the mirror of ice. She snarled through grit teeth. Her body refused to respond to her. Left with no other resort she screamed. Nanna was trying to say something to her, trying to touch and sooth her, but all she could focus on was her inability to move. She needed to. She had to. Everything was for naught if she could not move! The echoes of the dead, the swords of the unliving, and the failings of mortal blood in all its myriad forms were nothing if she could move! The world had evidently long been shattered. Broken pieces scattered in the wind. She was done being dragged along its jagged edges. Done being dragged back to what she never wanted by cursed Fate time and time again. Done being tossed like a boat from one bloody mess to the next in an endless typhoon.

Her rage bubbled over. From visions to the forest mud splattered in blood under her feet. From age after age dumped into her mind. At every turn, at every junction, and every point misery had been thrust upon her by the world. Its demands, its machinations, its whims. All crushed down on her bones. Seemingly always an implement of someone else's will, and having to suffer for it.

Every ounce of her will fought her flesh for one more step, one more rise to her feet, and one more charge. Her body itself was in open opposition to her by very simply having nothing left to give. She craned her neck back up to glare down into the dark. In her silence she finally heard Nanna.

"Ryuko please, I can't imagine what you are feeling but please just calm down so we can help you--"

"The help I need... is strength."

"Ryu?"

Ligaments screamed in pain as one foot managed to come forward under her.

*"I've tried running. I've tried fighting. I've even tried being dead to the world. Nothing is ever **ENOUGH! There's only one way***

this ends... I need power. I need more power! If nobody and nothing can make it stop I WILL!"

The muscles in her back bristled as she got herself further upright and managed to stare up directly at the ceiling. The faintest burning red glow of shapes flickering in the dark from her shoulders. Only a poor hunter neglects the tools provided to them, and she no longer had reason to refuse them. She screamed toward the sky beyond the beams and roof.

"FINE I NEED MY POWER!"

Within her chest her heart rate soared. From her beating core itself the instructions of channeling were pressed.

But only the faintest wisp of cold licked her skin near the floor. Every effort mustered barely conjured a draft if even considered that much. The cold it brought though spread. It crept in from the edges of her limbs. It seeped deeper until residing in her bones. An invitation the flesh welcomed without control. Its comfort unable to be denied. Once more she fell to her one hand. A cold she could not refuse to embrace as it flowed up through her core into her head. Muscle after muscle lost feeling.

Her vision bleary she closed her eyes to try and clear it. In a snap the cold spread to fully envelope everything in the shattered ruins of what was her life. The next moment she managed to open them before her was an opulence incalculable.

Irreplaceable.

In her hands was cold metal of a silver goblet. Within it a drink made to mimic mercury so perfectly it was capable of mirroring back a strikingly similar, if deeply confused, scowl out of a gold fringed hood. The face, the jewels, the *vestments of office* sent pain through her head, but it could not hide a deliberate touch upon her shoulder. She jerked up and looked back to find another pale face that was all too familiar despite being hidden in part by a white porcelain mask. White and blue robes almost glowing in a pristine condition fit for the most royal of all occasions.

"Attempting to enjoy oneself, if nowhere else on Terra but at least here, would do wonders toward the perceptions held about thee."

She turned in place and by her arm was gently led away from possible prying ears of the crowds around. Each small metallic step they made echoed far, pierced through live music, and noticeably drew the eyes of hundreds of individuals clad in a multitude of robes, dresses, and all together excessively ornamented garb of only the highest societal reach. Beneath them was a white marble hewn into a gargantuan single slab that offered zero assistance in masking their movements. And no softer material

could be found from wall to wall of the cavernous hall full of life. Even upwards were pillars covered in the carved visages of tales of mettle twisted and turned toward vast vaulted stone ceilings. Each one touched by the glittering of a million perfect sapphires overhead. Endless blue stones embedded in a massive silver metal mass constantly slowly shifting, turning, and moving them in constellation patterns lit by skylight shafts ensuring infinite spotlights upon all below.

She had avoided the question for as long as could be polite by taking a drink, but eventually she had an answer.

"I... I do not enjoy prisons."

"You have no one to blame but yourself for this. Or did you presume thy office could shield thee from the entire consequences of both personally fraternizing with Summer's most secretive enclave, and interfering with inter-high-court agreements?"

"By Office some level of individual neutrality has always been respected. By Treaty war is supposed to be never more."

"Perhaps. If you were more agreeing to be present for one's courtly duties though one might have a better grasp of the Politic Eternal. His majesty was rather ruffled about the delays you caused, which put a few Dukes on precarious edges, which put undue pressure on the duchys to individually put up appeasing motions swelling the scale of the present event, which led to Her Majesty of the lesser court being compelled to pass on the official request for thee to serve thy Office's obligations today."

"So I have, and now I can't leave until its over."

"Precisely. Presence provides much all on its own sometimes... His majesty sends his regards."

"Are you are here just to remind me of my present torment? Shouldn't you be out hunting something or other for whatever feast is next?"

At that the woman reached up to take down her mask. The music ended. The murmur of voices ceased. Skadi's voice lowered into a slow labored whisper

"Oh but hunting... is precisely what is afoot."

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Those with any grasp of medical know-how set to work on site. Ryuko's limp body had been brought up to the alter and lit by the

one lamp on hand. Every square inch of her mangled form investigated, and plans for treatment enacted as best could be done under the circumstances. All she had been able to contribute though was order Uzu to get Nonon's pack from the cart. She could not set bandages or spells down any better than them. She could not offer any material advice worth more than the siblings may have on the patient's unique properties. There was simply not enough room at the table for another pair of hands, and nothing more she could do to help in any greater capacity than stand out of the way trusting her knights to work.

Perhaps setting aside magical instruction entirely for a complete focus on martial prowess had been unwise. Regardless of why the inability to assist was unreasonably frustrating.

Ghosts of the Fae damned, a kingdom worth of bodies damned by purposes above them, and an entire realm of the dead left lost to the world. Left to the hands of *Death herself incarnate*?

Absurd.

Utterly impossibly absurd.

Only a madwoman would believe such complete nonsense.

And yet here we are again.

The truth had always been the greatest asset of her mission. To find it the ultimate aid to all ambitions. Easy truths, hard truths, eventually the results had always been worth the struggle to reveal. The box had been opened because her own curiosity at what could be peered through the cracks.

The truth had never come out of a history book armed with an ax.

"So, how was it?" Uzu had returned with Nonon's bag and had been shooed away upon delivery. So he joined Satsuki on the front pew. She watched the thing get torn apart pocket by pocket to dole out its contents in a frenzy. It didn't take a trained eye to figure that was not a good sign. "Fighting an actual real live... uh, not live but living? Undead? Maybe? Ghosts. Fighting a ghost I mean."

"Uzu?"

"Ma'am?"

"That happened right?"

He took a moment to shift uneasily in his seat.

"Is that a trick question ma'am?"

"No. Tell me honestly did that *really* happen? Did I really swing

at a Fae ghost warrior woman?"

"Welllll, I saw what happened. You are the one that always tells me not to rely on my eyes alone. I felt the blast radius of air from every swing too. Haven't felt wind like that since the Gun Corp lighting up hillsides in Yunnan. Honestly never considered there being people able to bring the strength of a bombard through their arms. If it was a hallucination then we were all having the same waking fever dream. Trusting what you feel is pretty high on the order of figuring that out. That said I unfortunately didn't get any hands on action to confirm that on my own. First time we ever see an actual ghost to fight and what do I do? Freeze up. Awful. So, that's why I asked you ma'am. What's it like dashing in to bravely save the beautiful princess that shouldn't exist, by fighting an adversary that shouldn't exist, in a place that shouldn't exist?"

She Raised her primary sword hand and squeezed her fingers in to her palm.

"Like I swung a metal rod at a brick wall, and despite giving all the force and skill I could muster the only thing that truly broke was the fragile bubble of the world around us. *Again.*"

"How do you know it was a Fae and not some regular elf?"

"I know her. Rather I know of her. I was told about her."

"Really? By who?"

She gestured toward the alter.

"Ryuko knew her. Skadi. Warrior of the Winter Fae. She never described the details of the... *armor* beyond the general... *aesthetic*, but the robes fit."

"Armor is a word for it, not that I'm complaining! They've all *fit* real well so far. So... *if she's talked to you about them does every Fae warrior dress like a prostitute in combat or what?*"

Satsuki pinched the bridge of her nose. Uzu tried to apologize but she stopped him.

"You're not *wrong*, just..."

Rising voices dragged their attentions back to that alter.

"Boy you better do something fancy with that stick her pulse is dropping!"

Before she knew it Satsuki found herself beside Tsumugu at the table. Her hands put to work almost immediately by the large man.

"YOU PRESS HERE! Keep pressure on the artery!"

"Houka what's going on?"

"We are plugging holes as best we can there's just so damn many of them and--"

"IT'S GONE DOG SHE'S CRASHING!"

Nonon tore a bag open to put something under Ryuko's nose, Kinue started hammering away at her chest to manually keep things pumping, and all together the flurry of movement intensified. In stark contrast their patient for the first time in so many days fell completely, peacefully, still. Every finger stopped twitching. Her chest when let to relax stopped rising. Kinue took one last shaky check for a pulse on Ryuko's neck. Which turned into shaking hands grabbing the cold face. The lights of the Fae had all gone dark.

"RYUKO!!"

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She moved to take another drink of a wine so multi-faceted it was difficult to describe, and realized she could move. And taste. And smell.

Was this not a waking nightmare? She had never been in such conscious control of anything. Every word spoken, motion made, stab felt and so forth had always been an almost automatic process. A following of a script put to her by her own body. She blinked and realized the crowd had stopped moving. With another step she turned to look around. This time no soul turned to curiously study the echo of a metal heel and what its ordained bearer was up to. Skadi stashed her mask away somewhere within her robes before taking hold of one of Ryuko's hands to pry it off the goblet.

"Under the circumstances this one is doing the best one can... but having your cooperation would make this exponentially less taxing."

She dropped the goblet. It clattered against the stone in ringing metal pings as mirror like fluid splashed out. She tried to watch the lights from above reflect but everything momentarily shook. The air itself cracked into a high pitched whine like a turbine spooling up. Just for the briefest of moments. A short grunt of pain came out of Skadi.

"Mercy... Okay... I will explain as best I can soon, but right now..." She took their joined hands moved her grip down to Ryuko's

forearm. Tightly she clasped and pulled until they stood against each other. Her eyes a determined stare full of pain. ***"Thy soul... Thy soul teeters on the precipice of releasing thy husk."***

Ghosts of sensations flowed to her. Warm hands tugging this way and that, frantic cries into the void. Somewhere beyond the visions there was a fury about her form. A chaos of motion and noise. That she could not will herself to bring to mind. In fact as quickly as it emerged the intrusions ceased. Replaced with a dull nondescript cold. Even still it had been enough to know that something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

"I can't remember. What's happening?"

The hall broke. Stone by stone crumbled to fall into a black ink void all around them. They were left floating in nothing yet still gripped tight at the arm together. Some measure of relief crossed Skadi's face.

"That should buy some more time."

"Time for what?"

"To save thy husk."

"Husk this, husk that! Save from what!?"

"From its, end. An end. A true end."

"You're not making any sense!"

"Thy present temporary vessel cracks!"

"IN WORDS NOT METAPHORS!"

"THY BODY!"

Her meaning finally clicked. Scraps of the chapel came back to her.

"I'm dying!?"

"Already dead I'm afraid... Which does complicate things."

"DEAD!?"

"But for a moment listen! I've hijacked your senses to borrow them for this. It is only your life that mine anchors are bound... With your soul ripping away onto the wind I'm sinking, and you are being dragged down with me."

They had been moving. Ever so slowly down further and further into a darkness that was seeping into the edges of their robes and skin

itself. Flecks and shards breaking off to be obliterated in non-existent wind. The deep end of the mirror, the Void, was taking them. She gripped at Skadi and thrashed her legs, shook her free arm, and when all else failed tried to swim. Anything to avoid their seemingly unstoppable descent. All through this though Skadi smiled.

"Oh good at least SOMEONE is having a good time right now!"

"Forgive this one, but there it is... The great irony. The one thing all others but thy own wayward soul lost in our torments... The will to live. Simple, yet it is infectious truly... It is... Wonderful to experience again." Skadi pulled her back in and shifted her grip once more back to Ryuko's hand. **"Pressing matters though yes... I could not condemn you to an eternity of hell alone... There was consensus on that actually, but..."** Skadi shoved their joined fingers into Ryuko's robes. Straight into a spot where the storage within could be found. **"This one cannot do anything if thy link to the world is severed completely... The day of no more chains, no more shackles... Purposes of thy own design... The freedom to pursue thy will is upon thee."**

That got Ryuko's undivided attention.

"How!? What can we do!?"

"Use Here while my anchors on your soul remain... Right now dump everything else from thy mind but thy final resort."

"I don't remember anything like that! Why do I-"

"Not here! Not now! Ask not why just pull it from the depths of thy secure possession and I shall do the rest! Scour thy automatic, thy instinctual, responses and it will come."

Another shake hit everything.

The sound of shattering ice echoed through the void. Chain after chain fell past them to vanish into the darkness.

Skadi howled.

"THY CONTINGENCY PLAN! THY LAST RESORT!"

Her hand ventured into the storage void as she let the words ring about the mess of her head. Memories eventually flashed to a device that could never be forgotten. A gold ornamental syringe system. Its primary component was a central needle and attached crystal vial full of an amber liquid that seemed to absorb light itself to trap it. A concoction so horrendously foul no sane individual would ever wish to so much as smell its vapors lest it melt their flesh. No sane individual would have ever kept its formulation.

For periods of time though its last keeper was not always truly sane.

It came to her. The central mechanism itself was in their combined grasp between them. Pulled free from one of the darkest depths of her possession. Skadi chuckled to herself.

"Rash, impulsive, and never quite thinking ahead... But always... always somehow a backup plan to get through anything."

"If this is a vision then how does it help?"

"What you see and hear and feel may indeed be conjured imagery, but this one... To pull your husk from beyond the brink... Apologies, so many, in advance... there is only one physical link between thy Husk and Body. When you are whole once more we can talk... Heed my words though. I can't imagine this will end well for a mere Husk so time will still be of the essence... I WON'T be able to do this again. So come on, Old Friend. Go. Do as you've done for far too long! Commit thyself to thy duty above all else one last time! Find me! Find YOURSELF! LIVE!"

Skadi stabilized her with a bony hand, and shoved the device needle first into the center of her chest. Straight into her heart. Red light pulsating in time with the beating of blood pierced its way out of the hole as the vision collapsed violently. Her senses scattered in every sense for the briefest moment. Until she actually felt the heavy punch directly to her sternum.

Violently she gasped and sputtered. Her limbs flailed and were grasped by many hands which wrenched them back down against the hard surface below her back. The voices belonging to said hands jumbled as dull anxious noise focused on keeping her still. Her eyelids though impossibly heavy ripped open. Her mouth impossibly dry cracked out roars. Her body ached to ever new heights previously thought unreachable.

Yet remotely familiar.

With a wheeze which became a shrill scream her blood began to beat within her once more. Each stroke sending what felt like molten magma seeping through her veins. She was blinded by a collection of lights above but forced her head down low enough to seek the source of that punch. There was nothing. Nothing specific anyways. No sign nor hair of the gilded crime against nature. Other than the burning deep within flowing out from her own core.

Her head got pushed back against the table. Some pad of thick leather was bundled to help but she could tell there was stone under the rest of her. The medic responsible for that was a dark form haloed with light. He made visual instructions to the mass of hands around to stop her from moving once more, before he set to

work making a glow of light appear in bursts. Each one accompanied by a lesser burning that paled in comparison to the searing fire within her limbs.

Voices remotely familiar finally resolved as her hearing came back.

"Gods almighty what the hell!?"

"SHE'S ALIVE!"

"D-Dog what in the actual unholy hell did you do!?"

"I- I don't know!"

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW!?"

"I AM A MAN OF SCIENCE AND REASON THIS IS BEYOND MY SCOPE!"

"HER VEINS ARE GLOWING!"

"Both of you shut up and work!"

"Yes of course, just, just keep her steady so we can stop her bleeding out! A-Again!? Again."

"Her arm!"

"Is that- what- Where is the glow coming from!?"

The liquid fire continued to spread through her blood sending a scalding hot warmth throughout. Cold flesh warmed and sharp pains dulled as the world as a whole seemed to vibrate with energy now. Every ounce of her being needed to move all at once. The medic yelled.

"She's awake Nonon!"

"Not for long!"

She felt a cold wet rag forced down on her face. With newfound strength she fought to turn away from the sweet stale liquid it dripped.

"This is concentrated enough to put Toad down in a snap how is she still moving!?"

She tried to get up and was forced back down with a growling demand.

"Come on lads put some back into it she's literally an airy-fairy-twig!"

The world was spinning as the edges of her vision began to darken once more. She needed out. NOW. With a twist Ryuko slipped a hand free of one man's grasp, flipped around to engage the hands that dared trap her other arm, and fought to clear the table. Metal implements and cups got tossed to the floor in clatters.

Once more she was wrestled to the table so hands could put various bits of white cloth about her. Metal implements hard to make out in the blur of her vision were returned. knives and scissors and all kinds of horrid things. Implements of surgery and *experimentation*. She had to get away. She had to get away from the Medics! The fastest way out would only be possible if there were no ***nullifying restraints*** on her. In a plume of black smoke she dropped clean out of mortal grasp and straight through the table itself. The fools had left her *weapons* free. She drifted for just a moment. Immediately she dropped back into space, and face first hit the stone floor. She barely felt a slap from the impact of that. But that would be normal for this *state*.

There would be time to remember what external pain was later. Once memory worked at all. Escape was priority one. She scrambled forward, dodged the clasps of offending fingers, and tried to get up. Tried to run out of whatever horrid chamber of tortures awaited her this time. The world swayed but she dodged one after another as she got upright.

Until a man stood before her.

The face which had been hidden by shadow was above a white uniform of a sort.

Flashes of a white room came to her.

Of the uniformed ***hell on Terra***.

He tried to grab at her.

She swung at him.

Her fist collided with the side of his face as she threw her weight up into the throw. The fools had not locked her down! Let them suffer! Pure feral ferocity flowed forth from limbs freshly energized by a chemical cocktail devised by *old demons*. She fell atop him and began to throw fist after fist toward arms he used to defend his face.

Something somewhere in her brain remotely registered that she was using both arms to do this.

There would be time to think about that too later.

The medic was down and her path clear.

The path, she had to take the path.

She leapt forward escaping the clutches of another person and barreled forward into a stone doorway left open. Down and down she ran dodging rubble and pursuer alike until finally disappearing into the dark of hallways. Leaving the two that had just managed to keep pace to double over panting and swearing in the dark.

Uzu slid down a wall as Satsuki held onto the corner of a stone brick to steady herself.

"What the fuck just happened!? She just went from stone cold to sprint race!"

A dead woman had just came back to life, fought like she'd been possessed by violence itself, and catapulted her way down a flight of stairs in what was supposed to be a tomb. That was very clearly *not*. From behind them up the hall light finally came running from Tsumugu catching up with the lantern.

"How's Houka big guy?"

"Your pink one is helping the bleeding, more importantly where is she!?"

"In the dark. Somewhere ahead... *I need another minute*, I've been running--"

"Every second in chase is critical! If she's not here than neither are we, MOVE!"

Uzu groaned, but got up and they continued the chase with Tsumugu lighting the path. As they ran it turned out there were no branching off tunnels thankfully. Just another flight of stone stairs that took them even further down into the depths of the castle underground. The floors, ceilings, and walls were all made of very well cut stone unworn by passers by. Questions abounded on why this was all here. How it had been made. There was no time to stop for any kind of closer inspection. Even when details about the ceiling grew strange.

Eventually the trio reached an open room. Bookshelves and tables of all kinds were littered with papers, devices, bundles, and glassware. From above like back on the remains of the old broken Airship crystal pipes cast a dim white glow through which they could see. Despite everything they slowed significantly from shock as they took it in. Satsuki wandered over to a table and wiped dust off a long cloth wrapped bundle.

"She ran down here with purpose. Tsumugu what is this place?"

He could see a doorway at the far end of the room leading to another hallway also lit by the pipes continuing on, but could not

help but to check every corner of the room for where someone could be hiding.

"I've never been here, but from what's about it looks like the small workshop off the main library did. For what Lord Isshin was doing it always felt too small admittedly. We all figured he was just good about using space."

They stopped and looked up when a pulse of blue light shot through the pipes like a wave that passed over them.

"That was coming from deeper in."

The chase was back on. The hall beyond the first room was short and cold. The further they went the colder it got. Another room came up filled with more equipment like the last, but there was signs of struggle. In a line from the door they entered to the next was overturned chairs, toppled over books, and broken jars seeping glowing white fluid onto the floor. Ice clung to spots along the pipework above who's light made their breaths visible.

Uzu breathed in deep as they continued to another hall that turned left.

"I'd say the cold is a refreshing change, but is anyone feeling it kinda bite?"

"It's dry."

"Like winter air dry but worse?"

Another blue pulse passed them as they finally reached the end of the tunnel. The last doorway led out to a walkway of metal built high on the sides of a massive room two or three stories down. All underground. All made of stone. In the middle of which was a golden assembly the size of a stagecoach encased in various crystal glowing pipes, and large swaths of blue ice. Each separate section of blue had the base of a chain grown out of it extending off with links into thin air. Large golden devices otherwise around the space hummed, whirred, hissed, and shifted. Metal bars and disks and hoops and innumerable other pieces all at work in the blue light.

Importantly though down at the ground level Ryuko was kneeling against the base of the great machine. Beside her also kneeling was the ghost.

They sought out stairs to get down and listened to voices echo up to them.

"Why... Why?"

"I cannot fathom the will of mortals and their reasons... But time

runs short."

"It would never be short."

"In some ways... But not at present."

Tsumugu yelled out when they reached the second walkway and were making their way around to the last.

"RYUKO!" She looked up behind her and he stopped to stare back.

"Ryu what's going on!?" She turned toward the ghost, and they both stood up.

"You were right Uncle."

"About!?"

"Needing what I have."

The ghost touched the ice and the blue glow intensified. Inch by inch it turned into water that soaked the stones below them, revealing glass. Satsuki and Uzu had managed to get all the way down to the first layer of walkways of three, but the room shook knocking them to the metal below them. The entire room rumbled. Various bits of machines began to hiss loudly, and pipes groaned. One by one the ice chains snapped. Ryuko put her hand upon the exposed glass and her own red light joined Skadi's blue in stripping away ice. Until piercing red shafts of light emerged from within the assembly. Which gave way to a red pulsing light that erupted to fill the entire space. Around the center of the machine was layer upon layer of crystal glass. More rumbles shook the earth around and splashed water out of crevices in the gold to reveal deeper and deeper into the core.

The three tried to continue toward her, but the rumbling of the room forced them to grab onto the metal railing to steady themselves.

The questions and concerns of the living were put to complete pause as finally within the melting confines a form was becoming visible. Tattered, dark, and still was a body. Pulled from its chest and suspended in an assembly on its own linked back to the body with glowing red lines was a fiercely beating, glowing, ruby heart. Other such lines much like the chains pointed off to nothing with ends that did not exist.

Out the top of the whole thing though was a gold syringe which had been forced through the glass shattering a hole in it to make room. Its glowing amber contents still visible in its crystal shaft.

Ryuko turned to look back at them one last time before she turned into black smoke and vanished into the cracks of the machine.

Satsuki finally managed to make it all the way down first and hit the glass in the same spot Ryuko vanished. She addressed the ghost.

"You!" But got no response. She tried again in Sylv as best she could. **"You!"** And that got the ghost's attention. Satsuki stared up at the form a full head taller than her. **"Where she is? Skadi!"**

"What curiosity is this now? What manner of being are thou?"

A ghostly hand reached for her. Uzu caught up and tried to slap it away, but his own arm went clean through. Those same fingers however brushed Satsuki's shoulder, up a length of hair, to her head. Which was ignored for the sake of purpose. Satsuki repeated herself.

"Where she is!?"

"A mortal knows of this one? This one barely knows this one... Thou has spoken to her."

A chain end fell nearby with a crash making Uzu jump.

"Lady Satsuki the ceiling--"

"Answer question!"

Skadi turned her by the chin to look through the glass even as stress fractures bloomed in jagged lines. Skadi's breathless voice finally answered.

"Deep within the confines of a low born prison, Half blood... It was re-purposed, reused, salvaged from the dark hole our lot were imprisoned in life... How it ended up down here in a new hole matters not... Only the contents does."

Stones began to fall from the vaulted ceiling where machinery was outright bursting in showers of sparks. Satsuki ignored Uzu's warnings, ignored the danger about, and parsed as much as she could. Not all of it could be grasped, but the gist carried through. She still got stuck on a single phrase directed at herself though.

"Half... Half blood? What do you mean half blood?"

Her last question was not answered. Noises blared. Long wailing notes that reverberated through the room and droned into longer dull noise, until powering up again. The noise was deafening. Uzu finally decided enough was enough and grabbed Satsuki, hauled her off her feet, and ran for the stairs with her over his shoulder.

"SANAGEYAMA UNHAND ME--"

"SATSUKI ITS TIME TO LEAVE!"

She was ready to get violent with him until she watched a large stone fall, hit the floor, and crashed into the machine where she had been standing. She finally noticed that the whole room was coming down. She was thrown forward to the walkway floor when another stone fell and hit the walkway behind them. The railing alone saved them from a two story drop. The two looked back and scrambled to get up to Tsumugu and forced him to get moving as well.

With effort the three managed to reach the hallway out and may have stayed there, but a bolt of red lightning boomed through the room behind them. Followed by another. And another. The sound of shattering glass heralded a harsh frozen wind which ripped at them as it flowed in from where they had come.

Breaking into a sprint the group ran for their lives. The pipes full of power flooded with red light, overloaded, and shattered over them as they ran for the entrance to the hidden lab. The walls shook and cracked as the red light spread to fill every crystal length possible. Every breath of air was freezing cold, and charged with a sensation that made them sick. Life itself was being torn to shreds around them, and dragged deeper into the ruin.

Despite the earthquake they eventually reached the final set of stairs upward.

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It had been a slow day. Not many patients to help, but at the same time not many people probably looking for him for helping said patients. Carefully he packed his gear and slipped his sack onto his back.

"Thank you again for coming Doctor."

He turned back to give a hearty smile to a young woman wringing her hands in her apron. And to the little boy hiding behind her legs, but still peeking out.

"Oh don't worry about a thing it's my pleasure to help anyone in need!" He slipped his bag off and took a knee once more to get down to eye level with the child. "You know son I think I might have one more special thing which could help your throat. Would you like some?"

Cautiously the boy came forward and took off an over sized hat. He

nodded, just enough to shake the longer hairs about the top of his ears which were in the smallest point just a little too pointy.

Gingerly the doctor reached back into his bag and pulled out a little orange ball wrapped in paper.

"Here ya go, everything is better with a little bit of honey right?"

The boy took it and scurried off to hide once more as his mother blustered apologies he laughed off.

"I'm so sorry he's--"

"Once again it is all fine. Let kids be kids and cherish them while you can."

Packed once more he bid his farewells and left the little home in a little corner of the city's lesser desired streets. Looking up toward the sky he fought back a tear that finally broke free and blew his nose on a handkerchief.

"Cherish them while you can."

Slowly he began walking in the evening air. Occasionally offering small hellos to others about the old quarter streets.

The old *Fair quarter*.

He stopped at an intersection to let a cart go by, but remained in place when an unseasonably cold wind blew from the north. Dark clouds had gathered, but not over the city, nor the bay, nor anywhere other than directly south.

That was odd.

Some other people had stopped to comment to each other about the short lived cool breeze, but something made him continue studying the sky. Thunder rolled, but again few if any paid it much mind. The clouds were south the and wind north. Rain would not be coming to Munze today.

Something else was.

With a quicker pace he made his way to a shop close by and knew where they stored a ladder. Quietly he borrowed it and climbed up to their roof. Clinging to a chimney he continued to study the clouds. There was not much directly north after the tree line. Little hamlets here and there where farmers built near each other. It was possible he should start to head there to potentially see about helping anyone in need out there, but the clouds seemed further than that now that he had a slightly better vantage point.

But what was farther than them?

It was small, but a bright flash lit up the clouds in a line.

Red lightning.

Another bolt flashed.

Unearthly light in the direction of the old castle.

He had only ever seen such a red light once in his life.

On the worst day of his life.

Quickly he clambered down the ladder and almost fell off. It didn't matter he had to go. He ran all the way home and burst through the front door. His wife screamed for a moment before scolding him as he set about restocking his bag.

"Barazo! Heavens, what on earth was that! What is going on? Where are you going?"

He stopped when he was at the door once more.

"I'm sorry honey, but duty calls. I'm taking the horse."

"An emergency? Do you need anything else."

"I don't know, and I don't know, but that's okay!"

"Be careful please. Oh but before you leave where are you going?"

"To see the Lord."

"The- *The Lord!*?"

Any further questions she had were lost in the wind as he took up the reins and kicked Mazzy into a gallop. Whatever was going on over there was something big, and out of the ordinary.

"I'm sorry girl I know its late but we need to go."

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"There, last one. You're fine now Dog."

Nonon got up and clapped her hands clean of dust from the floor.

"You two... You two good?"

Kinue helped the bloodied Houka up to his feet and handed him his glasses.

"We're fine, and you should mend... I'm sorry I don't know what came over her. I don't know what happened to her, I- I just--"

He patted himself down and calmed down when he found his notes still intact on his person.

"To be brutally honest I have no ideas myself, *but* the important thing is she was able enough to get up and do all that."

"You're right."

Kinue stared toward the open tomb as she clutched Ryuko's cloak in her arms.

"The others went after though. We have to follow."

Houka reached for his staff where it lay when the ground shook.

Carefully he directed them to brace against the alter until it passed.

"Earthquakes?"

Kinue grew more concerned.

"We never get those here!"

And a cold wind began to whirl into the building passed them.

"As much as I would like to get as far away from a broken stone building as possible if such a thing is happening, I must agree that we need to see if everyone else needs help."

He lit his staff and led them toward the stairs.

He had to throw himself to one side to get clear of Tsumugu rushing out the hole. Uzu and Satsuki shortly after, the latter of which yelled and kept moving for the doors.

"NO TIME TO EXPLAIN JUST RUN!"

Trusting she had a reason they did just that. As soon as the main chapel door was open a heavy wind buffeted them back. They found the peaceful day had become overcast by black storm clouds. Fighting gusts of heavy wind they couldn't get out. Wave after wave of deafening thunder crashed from a multitude of blood red lightning arcs among the clouds. Each flash casting its ominous light across the land. The earth shook with tremors strong enough to force them to the floor.

Stones tumbled from the ruin as Nature itself was coming apart. Urged on the group stumbled out into the wind and made their way to the cemetery fence. Then a pile of stone they could hunker down behind against the ground. They made it just in time. A terrible echoing scream roared from underground. And an enormous lightning strike fired down from the heavens into the castle, into stone towers, and finally the chapel itself blowing it up.

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Satsuki was the first to open her eyes. She stumbled to her feet with ringing ears, but she managed to check if anyone was hit. Mercifully she only found living bodies intact and coming too as well in groans. Uzu called out.

"Can we STOP doing this, fuck..."

"Pull yourselves together. It might not be over."

Evening had gone leaving them in the dark of night. Against the stars above the castle's outline showed more had been destroyed in large chunks. Stone, timber, and metal sent flying was embedded in the stone walls still standing above them. It was a miracle none had come down on them in the explosions. Gathering themselves up Houka lit his staff and she pulled her sword free to produce its blue light. There was no sign of the lantern and it was presumed to be lost outright. She made her way back to what remained of the graveyard gate, beyond the headstones, toward the shallow crater where the chapel once stood. Toward air which had become freezing cold.

Carefully she scaled down the broken stones covered in ice and reached the new entrance to the underground lab. She tried to make her way down directly, but half through the first flight one of her feet slipped. She caught herself by stabbing the sword into the wall. Further passage would have to wait for the ice to melt, but it turned out there was no need. From the depths the echoing of slow metal footsteps came forth toward her.

Both times Skadi had appeared their lives had been put in jeopardy. With effort Satsuki managed to retreat to the top of the stairs.

Where she slipped again.

But this time her sword could not find purchase in the wall and backwards she fell. She braced for impact by protecting her head, but it never came. She had been caught by a gauntlet's red palm. Its black obsidian plates on top each individually carved with the

most intricate designs and patterns she had ever seen in her life. Set back upright she looked up to find a remarkably familiar red glowing line on a black helm made of more obsidian glass.

It melted away into black smoke so a pair of blue eyes could return. Their corners sharper, along with most of her features, but the woman was recognizable under the red hood trimmed in black and gold. Scars and splits from top to bottom slowly sealing up to bring the face back to a pristine statuesque state. What remained of old makeup was dust around her eyes and lips. From either side red gems dotted golden chains along her ears.

"Ryuko?"

The armored woman leaned forward against Satsuki for support and coughed out dust toward the floor. She clutched at her throat as it came out in black darkened spit. When she managed to stand up straight again recognition was there, she knew who Satsuki was, but no voice came. No attempt to speak was made. She just firmly directed Satsuki back up the stairs. Each step was a mix of leaning against each other, and using Ryuko's high heels to dig into the ice for traction. Somehow.

Once more at the top a crowd had mustered. From which Kinue charged forward and cried out through tears.

"RYU!" Satsuki tried to step away and give them space. Kinue didn't care and swept them both into her arms and brought them down to their knees while crying. Eventually she let up and accepted holding Ryuko by the shoulders to look her up and down at arm's length. "R-Ryuko? You look... different."

Ryuko looked down as the rest of her armor dissolved away into smoke, and robes. Raising her hands she turned them palm up to flex the individual joints. Before clenching them into fists. Everything creaked and popped. She shuddered. Her body spasmed in small ways until finally wet tears dropped from her face. Kinue brought her in as sobs turned into open crying. She immediately threw her arms around Kinue and shook as if trying to wail, but nothing came forth.

All the same the woman shushed her.

"Oh Ryu... Let's get you home."

Through the dark the chest was found, and around the rubble new and old they carefully made their way back up the path they had taken in. The whole way Tsumugu among others offered to help but Kinue refused and helped shoulder Ryuko along herself. Each combined step forward either ringing from metal clacks on what stone they crossed, or digging into whatever soft material came instead.

Leading at the front Houka and Uzu were the first to reach the front gate of the keep, but there was a problem.

"Uzu did you untie it?"

"No! I left the cart right here!"

One by one they rejoined and the mystery was solved. A bit of the reins was still on the gate where it had been tied. Tsumugu knelt down to undo it and held it up.

"In all the commotion the poor thing must have gotten scared. Tore its own way free to run for its life."

Spirits dropped.

Until a voice called out from the dark down the road.

"Hey! Hey folks over by the lights! Would this stray oxcart happen to be yours!"

Hands went to weapons as a stranger on a horse appeared leading the ox beside him. Within the light area they had he dismounted his horse and convinced not only it, but the ox to stay where they were. Tsumugu stepped forward.

"As it happens I borrowed it from the Schmidts. You found em?"

"Came at me like a bat out of hell from the uh storm of a sort that was going on. I saw it and was making my way over to see if anyone needed help either way."

"From Munze?"

"Yes sir."

"Not familiar with you."

"I... tend to travel to where I'm needed. My wife stays home and runs the apothecary in the old quarter when I'm away."

"Apothecary... That wouldn't happen to be the place by the wood shops would it?"

"The one and only!" He walked up to Tsumugu and put out a solid hand. "Doctor Barazo Mankanshoku at your service!" Hesitantly Tsumugu took it and greeted the man in kind. "You know I've heard of you I think from Gran right? Crazy fellow hunting beasts out here."

"That sounds like something she would say."

"Great to meet ya! Now does anyone by any chance need some help

with-" Barazo finally scanned the rest of them and quickly zeroed in on Ryuko and Kinue as they crossed out the gate. His jaw fell and he dropped to one knee. At the commotion Ryuko looked up and locked eyes with him. Despite her aches and pains something about him was oddly familiar. A face she knew better than most but she'd never met him. He cried out, "YOU! Y-You're-" He dropped his supply bag off his shoulder and bowed about as deeply as he could.

Despite the motions of caution from Kinue Ryuko stepped forward toward him.

When she stopped he looked up at her.

"Your Majesty! I- I, it's you. You survived! You... Doctor Barazo Mankanshoku now and forever at your service if you ever need your highness! You saved my daughter's life. There will never be a way to repay what that cost you, but so long as I live I will try!" Confusion crossed her face. And the seemingly ever present cheer in his face fell just a bit. He took out a rag from his pocket to wipe his face clean. "At the beginning of the end, *Kronprinzessin*. In the bay." He looked back up at her with eyes full to bursting with tears. Now that she got a proper look at him the round features about his face were indeed powerfully familiar to a little girl that needed to breath. She tried to speak but only coughs came out.

He got up, retrieved his bag, and held out a clean handkerchief so she could wipe her mouth.

"I never met his Lordship personally. I was... I was nobody frankly. Nothing more than a back alley medicine man. *I was nobody*. But you were there. In the right place at the right time with the right heart. You still saved her! No hesitation. I... I took it as a sign. To turn my life around. To do what needed to be done for those who needed it."

Satsuki gave Houka a once over before taking him by the arm and dragging him along to the front. She was going to ask him to look her knight over, but he stopped to speak first when a bell run in his head.

"Did you say Mankanshoku?"

"Um, why yes I did! How can I- oh goodness what happened to you lad?"

"Oh a bit of this and that, more importantly by any chance this daughter you speak of... where is she right now?"

"Oh uh, well, after everything she felt rather strongly about a lot of things so she decided to go south and make something of herself. She's been sending money back to help keep us going even when we told her it wasn't necessary. We've been real proud of

her!"

"Is her first name Mako?"

"How... How do you know what? Yes it is but--"

"Sir your daughter enlisted with us."

He looked down at their uniforms, marred as they were.

"You're kidding! But- but she said she was working for..." He looked at Satsuki and recalled many a detail from letters. Then back to Ryuko. Then looked them all over again. "Well ain't this a small world after all."

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The once white stone walls of Honnouji had been stained black in ugly swaths. In a bid to save the second wall fire had been set to the water district. Which worked for a few days but eventually ran out of things to burn among all the stone construction, and the enemy was now pulling in reserves from gods knew where. Men, munitions, and even hundreds of mages were now in opposition to the lone island. The original garrison diminished by the day. Who was organizing this almost professional monstrous onslaught they did not know, but they had no choice but to fight on as the scouting corp tried everything they could to get demands for reinforcements out to the Empire at large.

They had been out of contact with all Imperial garrisons for a month.

Some began to wonder what on earth could be taking the Legions so long to notice.

To send even a sign that their war was noticed.

Eventually under the unprecedented battering the second wall as mighty as it was showed signs of cracks. It was by all accounts a suicidal position to assault with sheer cliffs of incredibly hard stone on all sides, and only one winding path available to the top littered with choke points, murder holes, and gates. The enemy still pushed ever more men into the devastation regardless.

A devastation witnessed sixteen hours a day, every day, by the battered armor of Ira Gamagori whom still stood at the front. Helping hold the line from each and every hourly attack he was physically present to fight against day in day out. The once pristine almost mirror polished surfaces of steel were now covered

in sections of handwriting among dents.

He was personally carving the name of each and every fallen soldier under his command into his armor. Each one identical to painful marks that would forever be imprinted upon his very soul. The suit itself no longer leaving his skin so as to be ready for action at a moments notice.

"Steady!"

"Don't let them up the wall!"

"Where's the cauldrons?"

"Shields!"

Bracing pike in one hand against the ground he raised the shield in his left up as far as he physically could. Along with the line of troops stretched from wall to wall beside him, all standing before a gate. Line of spears advancing toward them under the cover of archer fire.

"ANY MINUTE NOW!!"

The rough voices that screamed back an affirmative in unison from crouched second and third lines behind him wasn't to acknowledge the order, it was to intimidate the enemy as their deafening shouts echoed down the stone path. From above in fortified watchtowers whistles blew, followed by a flood of seawater drawn from pipes in the keep and brought to boiling cast down into the path.

In heavy sashes cauldron after cauldron of scalding salt water was dumped on top of the advancing enemy lines. Ranks breaking in a screaming painful disorder.

"CHARGE!!!"

Rushing forward the spear line impaled the first two rows before bracing once more. Second and third ranks of reinforcements filtering passed them as planned. Some leaping off the corpses to directly attack panicking center and rear lines in the formation.

Carving his way through Gamagori was the first to reach the advance party to relieve them. In particular joining a pair of women wielding war-axes. The first wildly crushing and hacking her way even deeper through the chaos as the second followed as best she could. Side by side they made it all the way through to archers. Cutting some of them down until the last stragglers broke and ran. Job done they turned their attentions back up the path.

"Lieutenant!"

"Sir!"

"Soldier!"

The second young woman despite everything snapped to full salute. By chance the motion took her out of two different enemy swings, which she answered with connecting blows as she yelled in panic.

"GAH!"

"Pull yourself together soldier we are the point of the spear!"

Standing firm the advance party rejoined and formed the final wall of the trap. Within minutes every last raider was dead. When warning whistles blared again though they all rushed back to the gate. Uncaring for the sweat and blood that flowed down their bodies they took up their spears and positions once more to do it all again.

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By sun down Ira and the young soldier had to carry the lieutenant, ax still in grasp, back into the second district. This officer had time and time again pushed into formations of fresh combatants with the same intensity and ferocity as the first rush. Each and every time shrugging off wounds and exhaustion to not only keep up, but in actuality pick up their pace. The price of her ferocity was limp legs dragged on a stone floor of a building re-purposed into a field hospital. Blood poured from her armor in a steady patter of drips when not blooming red over once white fabrics.

"Hang on we're almost there."

"Y-Yeah ma'am just keep that blood inside and- and everything will be okay!"

Opening her eyes when they were among the groans of the injured she quietly told them to stop. It was already too late.

"No... Don't... D-Don't put me down... u-u... up... Commander... M-Mors... Mors vincit omnia."

Hardening their hearts both men pulled her shoulders upward to get her standing straight up. Through the pain she smiled. Ira's voice falling lower as his jaw tight as granite was forced to move.

Death always wins.

"Lieutenant Hakodate as acting field commander in Her Majesty's stead I say your service to this legion, and your fellow soldiers, has been nothing short of *exemplary*. Your courage in the face of

impossible odds inspiring. Your actions to the war effort irreplaceable. *It has been an honor and a privilege to fight by your side... Dismissed.*"

The blood covered ax fell. Its head hit the ground first with a crash that drew the surrounding halls attention as its long metal shaft bounced in a clatter upon the floor. When it settled they were only left in a suffocating silence missing one small breath forever more. Carefully they took her back out the door to the infirmary and set it down along a row of bodies awaiting preparations to be moved. Another man retrieved her ax and put it in her grasp before they respectfully laid a sheet over her while those around that could folded their hands.

She had died standing in the face of overwhelming opposition demanding they kneel in surrender, and would be laid to rest with full honers when possible. She among the growing many had earned that much. A number of broken arrow shafts in her back testament to how hard they were willing to fight. They had to. No word had made it back from beyond the shore. No one else seemed to be coming for the soldiers and civilians still alive within the keep.

Outside the building Ira found the soldier holding her head in her hands. Brown mop of hair haggard and matted with blood that was not her own.

He sat down beside her.

"I never got your name soldier."

She practically jumped and tried to salute.

He physically held her down by the shoulder.

"M-Mankanshoku Sir Commander sir!"

"You were in her unit?"

Her eyes sank down toward the dirt below them.

"Y-yes sir. She was tough, and sometimes mean, but- but..."

"But she taught you well. The unit will be taken over by her second, but I have need of soldiers like yourself."

She sniffled but looked back up at him.

"Really? Me?"

"Indeed. We cannot remain on the defensive forever. If we do we will only ensure our own doom. And the death of every civilian counting on us. We *must* strike back and when the time comes I will need only the finest members of this legion with me to ensure we

survive. You have the skills, I believe you can have the courage. Will you lend me your aid?"

She wrestled with the offer in her head. It was crazy! Everything had gotten crazy! But saving people was what she had signed up for. Its what she owed. Not to the Hime-sama and her great saving missions, but her *savior*. Her role model. Her *Kronprinzessin* forever. She wiped her tears on her bloody sleeve, inadvertently smearing war paint across her eyes and held up her pinkie finger toward the Commander.

"It sounds absolutely scary but someone will have to and I should do it! I promise!"

Ira was confused but answered her childish gesture in kind. Gods knew morale could use some levity around at some point.

"Agreed."

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From the top down a handful of commanders were dragged through their camps to great bonfires and thrown to their painful deaths. Standing before the fire new orders came down, *any man who takes one step back will be executed*. Looking upward from the docks a handful of black cloaked individuals responsible shivered. The world would know of this battlefield soon enough, word was spreading no matter how hard they tried to suppress it, and still after thirty two days Honnouji's damned banner while singed and sporting a handful of holes, still daringly flew.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: Sorry about the end bit, I keep the entire Honnouji events as a single dock and copied over the wrong section. Fixed now.

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